The Power of Intertextuality:

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO DIGITAL ADVERTISING IN MALAWI

MALLICK MNELA, MCIM (UK)

The Power of Intertextuality: A Strategic Approach to Digital Advertising in Malawi

By Mallick Mnela, *MCIM (UK)*

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DEDICATION

To my family - your love and patience made this possible. My wife, Jennifer, a cultural communication graduate and admirer of Kristeva, served as my first editor, offering thoughtful critique and steady encouragement.

Working on intertextuality has been inspiring. The journey - from proposal to countless reviews and publications - was demanding yet deeply rewarding. The abridged edition began as an odd idea but became the most fulfilling, proving that complex ideas only matter when made simple. I'm grateful to all who encouraged it and read my early drafts.

This is not an original study but a simplified version of my earlier book, *References in Malawian Digital Advertising: Mechanics of Intertextuality*. It also reflects the generosity of friends and colleagues who read, edited, and provided valuable feedback on the original manuscript. Readers seeking deeper academic analysis, theoretical grounding, and methodological rigour are encouraged to consult the original work.

This project was made possible through the support of a well-wisher who chose lifelong anonymity. May *Allah Azza wa Jalla* bless you abundantly for your kindness, brother.

Just as in the original project, I remain indebted to the inspiration of *Professor Chris Hackley*, the constructive feedback of *Dr. Tabani Moyo*, and the resource support of my go-to linguistics expert, *Luckia Emment*. While each contributed in different ways, any shortcomings in this final work are entirely my own.

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About the Author

Mallick Mnela (MCIM) is a former award-winning international journalist, editor, columnist, public relations practitioner, and peer media trainer. He currently works as a marketing manager in the higher education sector. With over twenty years of combined experience, he is an elected member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM-UK), a power member of the Digital Marketing Institute (DMI), and a member of the Institute of Marketing in Malawi (IMM).

He holds undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in marketing and journalism, and is completing an MSc in Digital Marketing at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU, UK).

Mnela has built a reputation at the intersection of digital marketing, communication, journalism, and technology. He was selected to represent African communicators leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the 2023 Journalism AI Festival organised by London School of Economics' JournalismAI and participated in prestigious fellowships, including the Digital Media Jamlab Fellowship (Wits University, 2020), Chevening Fellowship for Media Freedom (University of Westminster, 2022), JournalismAI Programme (LSE, 2023), Microsoft Founders Hub (2023), Babson College-ICFJ Media Viability Fellowship (2023), and the DW Akademie Fellowship on Data and AI (2024).

A certified master trainer in AI for communication and journalism ecosystems, Mnela's research now focuses on linking intertextuality, advertising regulation, and the creation of ethical, context-aware AI tools in marketing technology. Drawing on his studies of Malawian digital advertising, he is developing an AI framework that combines machine learning, generative AI, and a human-in-the-loop approach to automate, analyse, and evaluate intertextual references. The framework builds on his typology of intertextual references in Malawian digital adverts and is anchored in his earlier models - the *Intertextuality-Driven Advertising Cycle (IDAC)* and the *C-STRIKE* frameworks.

Preface

Research on intertextuality - the use of familiar texts, images, and cultural artefacts to create meaning - in Malawian digital advertising shows that marketers are performing well, with many adverts demonstrating technical maturity. Yet gaps remain, largely due to the absence of a structured, well-documented knowledge base outlining methods, frameworks, and best practices for designing and evaluating intertextual adverts. Without a sound grasp of the mechanics behind referenced material, adverts risk becoming offensive, forgettable, irrelevant, or misleading.

This book helps advertisers bridge the gap between intuition and strategy through a home-grown, practical solution. It is easy to use, directly applicable, and designed for busy professionals. Readers can draw inspiration, design campaigns, and assess past adverts with a sharper understanding of how references function in digital advertising.

The Power of Intertextuality: A Strategic Approach to Digital Advertising in Malawi builds on insights from *Decoding References in Malawian Digital Advertisements: Mechanics of Intertextuality*. While the original book focuses on theory and analysis, this edition distils those findings into a practical guide with quick, actionable insights. A few additional sample adverts have been included for clarity. The abridged version offers a concise overview, but readers seeking the detailed *"why," "where," "how,"* and *"when"* should consult the full book.

While the work itself may not be considered groundbreaking, it presents a methodical way to categorise, assess, and select intertextual references - a structured approach not previously explored elsewhere.

The central message remains: effective advert creation must be grounded in a proper understanding of intertextuality. References enable advertisers to communicate quickly and memorably, linking messages to shared knowledge and familiar cues to create adverts that resonate, engage, and encourage sharing.

Repetition in this guide is deliberate. It reinforces key concepts, accommodates different learning styles, and helps practitioners internalise complex intertextual principles for lasting understanding. If you find this rather basic, the advanced version - with citations, academic arguments, and methodological rigour - should be your next reading.

Each chapter follows a consistent structure for straightforward learning and application. This ensures readers can quickly grasp concepts, gain inspiration, design campaigns, and evaluate recent adverts with confidence.

This work serves both as a record of research and an invitation to dialogue. It presents new ideas open to scrutiny and growth, encouraging readers to explore, challenge, and expand on them. After years of development, your feedback can help refine these ideas, strengthen expertise, and, above all, showcase the distinct character of Malawian digital advertising.

Mallick Mnela, ***MCIM (UK)***
Lilongwe
Malawi
October, 2025

DISCLAIMER

This book includes excerpts and reproductions of selected advertisements for commentary, critique, and analysis, all for educational purposes under the fair dealing provisions of copyright law. All copyrights and trademarks remain the property of their respective owners; no infringement is intended.

Some adverts may not have been part of the original study's sampled data but are included as the clearest illustrations of key points. In some cases, advertisers or publishers later removed the adverts. These examples are presented solely to highlight the issues and lessons learned, not to perpetuate any harm. They are included strictly for scholarly analysis, not commercial endorsement, and this work is independent of - and not endorsed by - any referenced companies.

Critique is intended to support learning and reflection, not to diminish the work of staff, advertisers, their brands, or agents. Interpretations are offered within the context of this study and may not reflect the original advertisers' intentions or apply outside Malawi. For inquiries or research-related discussions, please contact m.mnela@2025.ljmu.ac.uk.

Introduction

Intertextuality may sound like a term for academics, but it lives in almost every scroll, click, and share we make online. It is the way one message borrows meaning from another - through familiar phrases, pop culture references, or shared cultural memory. In digital advertising, this ability to tap into what people already know and trust has become a powerful way to market products and services, capture attention, and build emotional connections.

Traditionally, advertising followed the *product life cycle (PLC)*: introduction, growth, maturity, and decline. Campaigns were planned around these stages, with messages tailored to build awareness, drive trial, sustain loyalty, or manage decline. The pace was predictable because both products and audiences moved through these phases in relatively stable markets.

Today, that structure has been disrupted. The digital marketplace runs on speed, saturation, and algorithmic visibility. Messages compete in real time for fleeting attention. Algorithms reward what is immediate and engaging, not necessarily what is long-term or strategic. This shift forces brands to adapt their marketing rhythm - from steady, product-led planning to agile, content-led execution.

In this fast-moving environment, success depends less on a product's natural life cycle and more on a brand's ability to stay visible, relevant, and meaningful within platform dynamics. Campaigns now evolve with audience trends, cultural moments, and algorithmic shifts rather than fixed marketing calendars.

From trending memes, hit songs, and celebrity endorsements to political slogans and viral TikToks, advertisers borrow from the culture around them to keep their brands alive in the public eye. A well-placed reference can make audiences laugh, stir nostalgia, or show that a brand *"gets it."* Here in Malawi, as in other markets, digital adverts draw from daily life - local sayings, community heroes, street language, and global pop culture all shape how products and services are presented and perceived. These references are not decoration; they are the real language of consumer connection in today's attention economy.

This matters for marketing professionals because intertextuality influences how people understand and respond to brand messages. One familiar phrase, image, or sound can turn a simple post into a viral product moment. When done well, it strengthens brand personality, builds recall, and drives sales. When misused, it confuses meaning, alienates audiences, and undermines brand credibility.

This guide helps marketers use intertextuality strategically in product and service campaigns - showing how meaning, culture, and audience insight combine to create impact.

The Power of Intertextuality: A Strategic Approach to Digital Advertising in Malawi is a simplified version of *Decoding References in Malawian Digital Advertisements: Mechanics of Intertextuality*. While the original book is theory-heavy, this edition is practical and designed for marketers who need quick, applicable insights.

It grew from reader feedback: professionals appreciated the research but wanted a shorter, action-oriented version. This guide delivers that - a concise, accessible companion that helps campaign designers, reviewers, and trainers use intertextual references as strategic tools for stronger marketing of products and services.

Chapter 1

What is *Intertextuality*?

Introduction

Advertising today is crowded. Consumers are constantly surrounded by messages, images, and sounds competing for attention. Standing out is no longer about being louder but about speaking in ways that feel familiar and relevant. *Intertextuality* makes this possible by drawing on what audiences already know - music, books, celebrities, or past campaigns - and turning that shared familiarity into meaning.

What is *Intertextuality*?

Intertextuality is a simple yet powerful concept: no text - whether a book, film, advert, or social media post - exists in isolation. Every text borrows from, or builds on others. The term was introduced by *Julia Kristeva* in the late 1960s, building on *Mikhail Bakhtin's* ideas about dialogue and meaning. It reminds us that meaning is not created in a vacuum but becomes richer when linked to something familiar.

In advertising, intertextuality is common. A billboard quoting a proverb, a radio jingle using a popular song, or a Facebook post referring to a trending story all draw on shared knowledge. These references act as cultural shortcuts, helping audiences connect quickly without much explanation. As the examples in the following pages show, this practice is widespread in the Malawian digital media landscape. Shared symbols such as brands, proverbs, folktales, music, and football carry deep meaning. An advert that refers to another brand's message, quotes a well-known proverb, or mirrors a familiar social story does more than sell a product. It connects with shared experiences, shows cultural awareness, and makes the message feel real and relatable.

A Brief History of *Intertextuality*

Intertextuality started in literature. In the 1960s, *Julia Kristeva*, a literary critic, introduced the term to explain how texts borrow from or respond to each other. She built on ideas from *Mikhail Bakhtin*, who said no text is fully original. Every story, poem, or play connects to earlier works. In a way, we could say no advert is ever original and independent of other texts. Many African writers, including Malawian author *Professor Steve Chimombo* and the celebrated *Jack Mapanje*, for example, have long drawn on lived experiences, past literature, oral traditions, proverbs, and folklore. A recent case of oral intertextuality was seen during the 2019 - 2020 campaign period, when *Dr Saulos Chilima* drew standing ovations for weaving oral traditions, proverbs, and folklore into his speeches. Such references help audiences connect more deeply with the message.

As media expanded, intertextuality moved from books to film, television, music, and later advertising. Advertisers saw that people quickly respond to what they already know

- a song, a film line, or a familiar image. Borrowing these references made adverts more memorable.

Today, intertextuality is a standard part of advertising. Brands use it in digital adverts, memes, or TV campaigns to connect with audiences through culture they already understand. What began as a literary idea now drives modern marketing. However, applying intertextuality from literature directly to advertising proved limiting, prompting the author to develop customised frameworks for categorising intertextual references and assessing market, regulatory, and ethical impacts within Malawi's digital marketing environment.

Pioneers of Intertextuality and Audience Interpretation

Knowing the pioneers of intertextuality gives readers a sense of where the concept comes from and why it matters. It offers perspective on the ideas and thinkers who shaped its development and influence over time in a very brief manner.

Julia Kristeva

Julia Kristeva introduced the term "intertextuality" in the 1960s, drawing on the earlier work of *Mikhail Bakhtin*. She argued that no text exists in isolation; *'every text is a mosaic of references, echoes, and transformations of other texts'*. This idea is particularly relevant for advertising, as it shows that audiences interpret messages by connecting them to what they already know, their cultural awareness, and personal experience.

For instance, when an advert references a well-known Malawian film such as *'Welcome to Maula'*, a well-known song such as *'Stand Up for the Champion'* by *Right Said Fred*, or a local proverb, viewers automatically draw on their memory of that source, shaping the meaning they take away from the advert. *Kristeva's* work also shows that meaning is co-created between the text and its audience rather than dictated solely by the advertiser.

Mikhail Bakhtin

Mikhail Bakhtin focused on the notion of *'dialogue'* and *'heteroglossia'* - the coexistence of multiple voices within a single text. He emphasised that every communication carries not one, but many perspectives, and that meaning emerges through interaction between these voices and the reader.

In the context of advertising, *Bakhtin's* ideas explain why audiences interpret intertextual references differently. Two viewers may watch the same advert and understand it in distinct ways depending on their cultural background, education, or exposure to the referenced material. This variability is especially important in places with multiple cultures like Malawi, where a single intertextual reference can resonate differently across demographics and social groups.

Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes extended the study of textual meaning by exploring how readers actively construct meaning from signs and symbols. He distinguished between *"readerly"*

texts, which offer fixed meanings, and *"writerly"* texts, which invite audiences to participate in meaning-making.

In advertising, *Barthes'* insights help explain the power of intertextual references. When a brand refers to a popular television show, meme, or historic event, audiences interpret the message based on their own knowledge and expectations. This interpretive activity allows viewers to create personal connections with the brand, often adding layers of meaning beyond what the advertiser intended.

Together, these thinkers show that audiences are far from passive receivers of messages. Intertextuality succeeds because viewers, readers, or users bring their own cultural, social, and personal context to the content. Advertisers who understand this dynamic can design campaigns that resonate more deeply, leveraging shared cultural knowledge while allowing audiences to engage actively with the brand's narrative.

In digital advertising, where content is constantly shared and remixed, the ideas of *Kristeva***,** *Bakhtin***,** and *Barthes* remain deeply relevant. Although their work centred on literature, recent grounded research on intertextuality in Malawian digital adverts by the author of this book now extends these ideas into marketing practice in new and practical ways. The study establishes clear categories and provides a framework for assessing the impact of intertextual references, helping marketers craft messages that audiences recognise, relate to, and share meaningfully within their cultural contexts.

Despite its rich history, intertextuality's use in advertising has long remained tied to literary theory. This book presents a new way of understanding and applying it - rooted in local practice, informed by research, and focused on helping advertisers use references more effectively and responsibly. It marks a shift from literature-based frameworks, often imposed on marketing, to a context-driven approach that better reflects how meaning is made in Malawian advertising today.

Intertextuality in Advertising

Advertising thrives on association. A brand rarely sells a product alone; it sells an idea, a lifestyle, or an identity. Intertextuality is a shortcut to building these associations. By borrowing from a well-known story or image, an advert draws in layers of meaning that extend far beyond the product itself.

Take, for example, how Malawian mobile companies and banks often use football references in campaigns. Football is more than a sport - it is passion, rivalry, and national pride. When an advert shows a group of friends watching Flames games while using a data bundle to stream on *Facebook live*, it is not just promoting internet packages. It is drawing from the audience's emotional connection to football, transferring those feelings to the brand.

This borrowing can be direct, like using the official Flames jersey or a famous player's name, or indirect, such as showing a group of supporters painted in red and green. Either way, the advert is not creating meaning from scratch - it is borrowing meaning from the powerful cultural text of football - *directly* or *indirectly*.

In the digital adverts below, three campaigns draw meaning from three different social stories. The first, *"ku GaGaGaDheDheDhe,"* borrows from a cryptic sexually suggestive viral *Times TV* interview in which *Brian Banda* spoke to an elderly woman who had received a donation of relief items during a cyclone in Malawi. The second features a Chishango condom wearing a wig and stylish spectacles similar to those used by

musician *Jetu*, complete with her famous catchphrase, *"Iwe ndi ndani?"* The third, by the Malawi Police, uses the word *"fadah,"* taken from a viral video where a man was heard saying *"Ipondeni fadah"* (*"Cruise, father"*) before being involved in an overspeeding accident. These examples show how effectively advertisers use *social narratives* to engage audiences and make brand messages relatable. Without awareness of the background stories, however, *intertextuality* collapses - and when it does, the message collapses with it.

Figure 1: *An Illustration of Digital Adverts Building on Texts Drawn from the Malawian Social Space*

Music is another strong example. A brand may use the late **Lucius Banda's** music, say *'Umuchengetere' (Spoil her),* in a romantic TV spot. For many Malawians, **Lucius** is more than a musician; he is a *cultural icon* whose songs symbolise love and everyday struggles. Connecting a product to his music, the advert inherits some of that symbolic weight.

Why *Intertextuality* Matters in Today's Digital World

Digital media has changed the way people consume advertising. Unlike traditional print or radio, digital platforms are fast, crowded, and interactive. People are bombarded with hundreds of messages daily, often swiping or scrolling past adverts in seconds. In this environment, recognition becomes more important than explanation. Intertextuality helps achieve this.

When an advert uses a familiar reference, it reduces the audience's cognitive load. The brain recognises the borrowed text instantly and connects it with the new message. For example, a meme-style advert on Facebook using a popular *Tikuferanji* clip requires little explanation. Audiences understand it immediately because the original video is already part of their cultural memory. The borrowed meaning makes the brand's message quicker to process and more likely to stick.

Intertextuality also fuels engagement. Digital culture thrives on remixing, sharing, and reinterpreting content. A clever advert that references a viral TikTok dance or a trending local joke is more likely to be shared because people feel part of a cultural conversation. It is not just an advert; it becomes a piece of digital culture itself.

For Malawian advertisers, this matters because digital audiences, especially the youth, are highly responsive to references that feel current and culturally relevant. A WhatsApp poster that borrows from a trending meme might spread further than a polished corporate video because it feels like it belongs to the community's conversation.

Risks and Responsibilities

While intertextuality offers power, it comes with responsibility. Not every reference works. If a borrowed text is unfamiliar, outdated, overused (*reference fatigue*) or misused, the advert can confuse or alienate audiences. Worse still, careless references can offend. For example, using sacred cultural symbols for light-hearted marketing can be seen as disrespectful. This is where cultural sensitivity matters. Marketers must know which references are appropriate, which are overused, and which are best avoided. Where audiences are diverse in language, faith, and culture, advertisers need to think carefully about how references will land. A joke that resonates in urban Blantyre may fall flat or even backfire in rural Mzimba.

Intertextuality as a Strategic Tool

The value of intertextuality lies in deliberate use. Borrowing meaning only for entertainment creates fleeting buzz. What matters is purpose: building recognition, creating relevance, or strengthening brand identity. When applied strategically, intertextuality can lift ordinary adverts into memorable campaigns.

The Bigger Picture

Intertextuality is not a passing trend. It is part of how communication works. In advertising, it emphasises that no message is ever truly original - it always connects to something else. The challenge for digital marketers today is not whether to use intertextuality but how to use it well.

In Malawi's digital space, where audiences are young, connected, and culturally alert, intertextuality can mean the difference between being ignored and being shared. Done well, it makes adverts resonate, builds trust, and anchors brands in culture. Done poorly, it risks irrelevance or backlash.

For practitioners, the task is clear: know your audience, know your culture, and use references with purpose. Intertextuality is not just theory - it is a practical tool for creating advertising that is both meaningful and effective in a crowded digital world.

How Texts Influence Other Texts

One of the most effective ways to understand intertextuality is to see how familiar cultural forms flow into each other. The diagrams below illustrate this process. Advertising rarely starts from scratch; it borrows meaning from music, books, celebrities, or other adverts.

Music → Books → Adverts

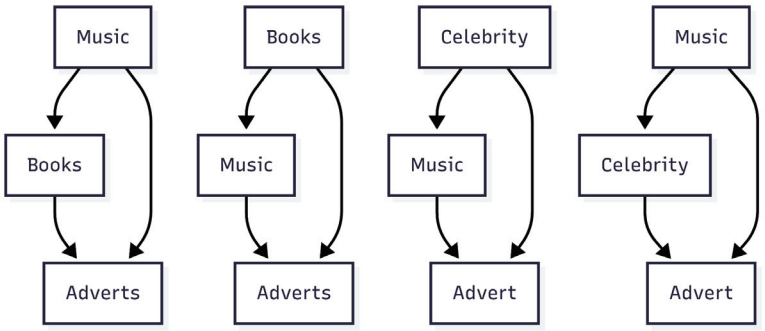

Figure 2: *How adverts borrow from earlier texts such as music, books, and popularity*

Music often inspires literature. *Bob Marley's songs*, for example, have led to celebrated biographies such as *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley*. In 2016, Forbes calculated that Marley's estate earned twenty-one million dollars, making him the year's sixth-highest-earning *"dead celebrity."* Unauthorised sales of Marley music and merchandise, such as t-shirts and other memorabilia, have been estimated to generate over half a billion dollars a year. At least five hundred books have been written about Marley. These texts, along with his music, have since been echoed in advertisements promoting lifestyle brands and tourism. Such adverts are effective because they do not exist in isolation; they build on a chain of references already meaningful to audiences.

Closer to home, *Billy Kaunda* is a renowned musician. He has extended his popularity to books by publishing an autobiography, *Hills and Valleys*. The content of the book and his music provide sufficient interest to generate awareness and interest.

Books → Music → Adverts

The reverse is also true. Classic texts such as **Shakespeare's** plays have inspired operas, films, and songs. *Disney's The Lion King* borrows from *Hamlet* and then generates music that advertisers use in *tourism* and *wildlife* campaigns. Here, *books feed music, and both converge in adverts*. Scripture is an excellent example in this regard. Renowned Malawian musicians such as *Patience Namadingo*, *Teresa Phondo*, and numerous others have created music from the *Bible* and other scripture.

Celebrity → Music → Adverts

Celebrities provide another layer. A musician like *Beyoncé* (globally) or *Jetu* (locally) produces music that enters *popular culture*. Their personas and lyrics are then picked up by brands in adverts, from local fashion houses and social marketers to global beverage companies. Consumers do not simply hear their songs - they recognise the identities of the celebrities embedded in the advert.

Another best example in this regard is the use of *Chuck Norris' Delta Force* theme song casually dubbed *'wadya ntoliro' (meaning:* he or she has eaten sweet potato vegetable leaves)

among Malawians during the *2025 presidential elections campaign*. The *Malawi Congress Party (MCP)* presidential candidate of that time *Dr Lazarus Chakwera* used the phrase - for its rhyming with sweet potato leaves called *n'toliro* - in a political advert.

Music → Celebrity → Adverts

Sometimes, the flow begins with music itself. A rising song creates a celebrity, and that celebrity then becomes the face of advertisements. In Malawi, musicians such as *Jetu* have used songs to gain public authority, which is later drawn into advocacy or brand communication. The advert here is not only about a product; it also borrows credibility from the music and its creator.

Furthermore, folklore, legends, and myths are also interwoven into this web of intertextuality. For example, staying with *Jetu*, she made a song called *Pangolin*. Apparently, *'pangolin'* is a street name for anything highly valuable. This was inspired by the arrest of many people found with the animal because it is said to fetch very high prices on the illicit wildlife market. It is exported to Asia where it is highly sought after for medicinal purposes.

These scenarios show why advertising is deeply intertextual. Every advert is already connected to other texts - songs, books, films, celebrities, and even earlier adverts. For practitioners, the key lesson is that adverts are strongest when they consciously work with these existing cultural resources. Instead of creating in isolation, advertisers should always position their messages within a network of references that audiences already recognise and value.

Intertextuality and the Question of Territory

Intertextuality is territorial. Its effectiveness depends on what an audience already knows. For example, an advert that builds on a local proverb will resonate strongly with audiences familiar with local culture. For others, the same advert may seem confusing or meaningless. The reference works only when prior knowledge exists.

This reliance on cultural familiarity means that intertextuality aligns closely with the principles of *segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP)*. Just as no market is homogeneous, not all audiences can recognise or decode every intertext. A rural Malawian audience may connect with the proverb-based reference in a local advert, while an urban, youth-oriented market may respond more readily to global pop culture or memes circulating on social media.

Intertextual references are, therefore, not universally transferable. They are shaped by geography, subcultures, and media consumption habits. A campaign that borrows from Hollywood films may be powerful in urban centres but fail to reach resonance in communities where those films are unknown. Similarly, references rooted in local folklore or popular songs may connect deeply with one demographic while being invisible to another.

For advertisers, this is both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that cultural references cannot be assumed to carry the same meaning across all markets. The opportunity is that intertextuality allows for sharper targeting. Tailoring references to specific segments - whether defined by age, location, or media habits - ensures that

advertisers can position their messages more effectively. In this sense, *intertextuality* is not just a creative tool; it is also a strategic device for *market segmentation* and *positioning*.

Chapter One Checklist: Effective Use of *Intertextuality*

Now that you know what *intertextuality* is and why it matters, use this list to guide your work:

Know Your Audience

- Who are you targeting?
- What cultural references, music, books, films, or local stories will they understand?

Link to Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP)

- Does the *reference* match the *lifestyle, subculture, or geography* of your *target group*?
- Will it strengthen your brand's position in the market?

Define the Purpose

- Is the *intertext* meant to *build recognition*, *show relevance*, or *reinforce brand identity*?
- Avoid using *references* only for fun or *short-lived buzz*.

Choose References Wisely

- Use texts (*songs, films, celebrities, campaigns*) that your target audience already connects with.
- Avoid *references* that may *confuse* or *alienate* your audience.

Evaluate the Impact

- *Ask*: Will this reference make the advert clearer and more memorable?
- Can it inspire positive associations with the brand?

Test Before Launch

- Show the advert to a sample of your target audience.
- Check if they understand the reference and respond the way you expect.

Action Point: Always remember that *intertextuality* is strategic. When aligned with *STP*, for example, it moves beyond creativity and becomes a tool for building lasting brand value.

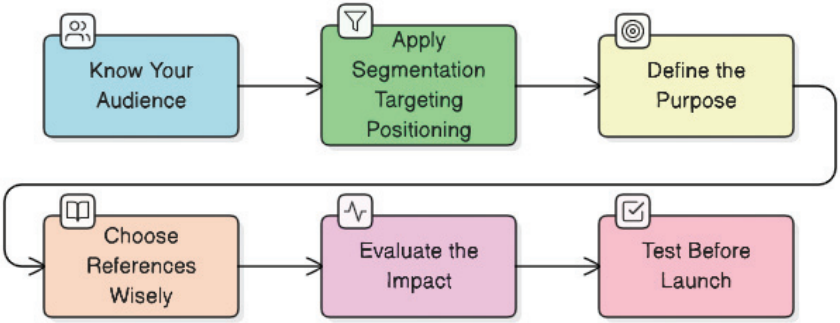

Figure 3: *Steps to Follow for Effective Use of Intertextuality*

Chapter 2

How Adverts Borrow Meaning

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we learnt that every advert communicates meaning, but not all meanings start with the brand itself. Some adverts borrow from what already exists - a song, a film, a slogan, or even a public figure. This borrowing makes adverts richer and more relatable. It allows audiences to connect new messages with what they already know or feel. Understanding how adverts borrow meaning is key to mastering intertextuality.

Key Concepts

There are three broad ways adverts use *intertextual references*:

- *Direct references*, where the advert openly uses or reproduces another text (for example, quoting a song lyric or using a well-known image).
- *Indirect references*, where the advert hints at another text through style, tone, or visual similarity without copying it exactly.
- *No references,* where the advert relies fully on its own message without drawing on any external text. Even so, audiences may still make their own associations.

Local Adverts Using *Intertextuality*

Knowing how local adverts borrow meaning can help you as a marketer to design campaigns that speak to specific audiences. It also helps marketers to spot what others are doing - from global brands using pop culture to local campaigns echoing familiar sayings or tunes. The goal is not imitation, but intelligent reference. In the next sections, each type of reference will be explored with real examples from Malawian advertising.

Borrowing Meaning in Advertising

As already observed, advertisements draw meaning from shared culture through different forms of intertextuality, broadly grouped into direct, indirect, and non-referential types. This helps them connect with audiences using familiar stories, symbols, and collective experiences. In this chapter, intertextual references are explained using a framework first introduced by the author in an article titled *A Grounded Typology of Intertextual References in Malawian Digital Advertisements* and later expanded in the book

Decoding References in Malawian Digital Advertisements: The Mechanics of Intertextuality. These works are highly recommended for readers interested in complex aspects of the subject. The author developed a list of grounded intertextual references based on an analysis of a purposefully stratified sample of adverts, resulting in the list below. Example adverts are shown in *Figures 5 and 6*.

***Intertextual References* in Advertising**

DIRECT REFERENCES	INDIRECT REFERENCES	NON REFERENTIAL
Confrontational	*Suspended or Delayed*	*Service Communication*
By-Stander	*Cultural*	*Brand Communication*
Parodic	*Historical*	*Crisis Communication*
Retaliatory	*Subtle Parodic*	
Emotional	*Narrative*	
Collaborative	*Implicit UGC*	
Cross-Media	*Temporal*	
User Generated Content	*eWoM Spillover*	
	Gamified	
	Comparative	

Figure 4: *Categories of Intertextuality References in Malawian Advertising (Mnela, 2025)*

Examples of Direct Intertextual References in Digital Advertising

The carousels below show examples of *direct, indirect, and non-referential* advertisements.

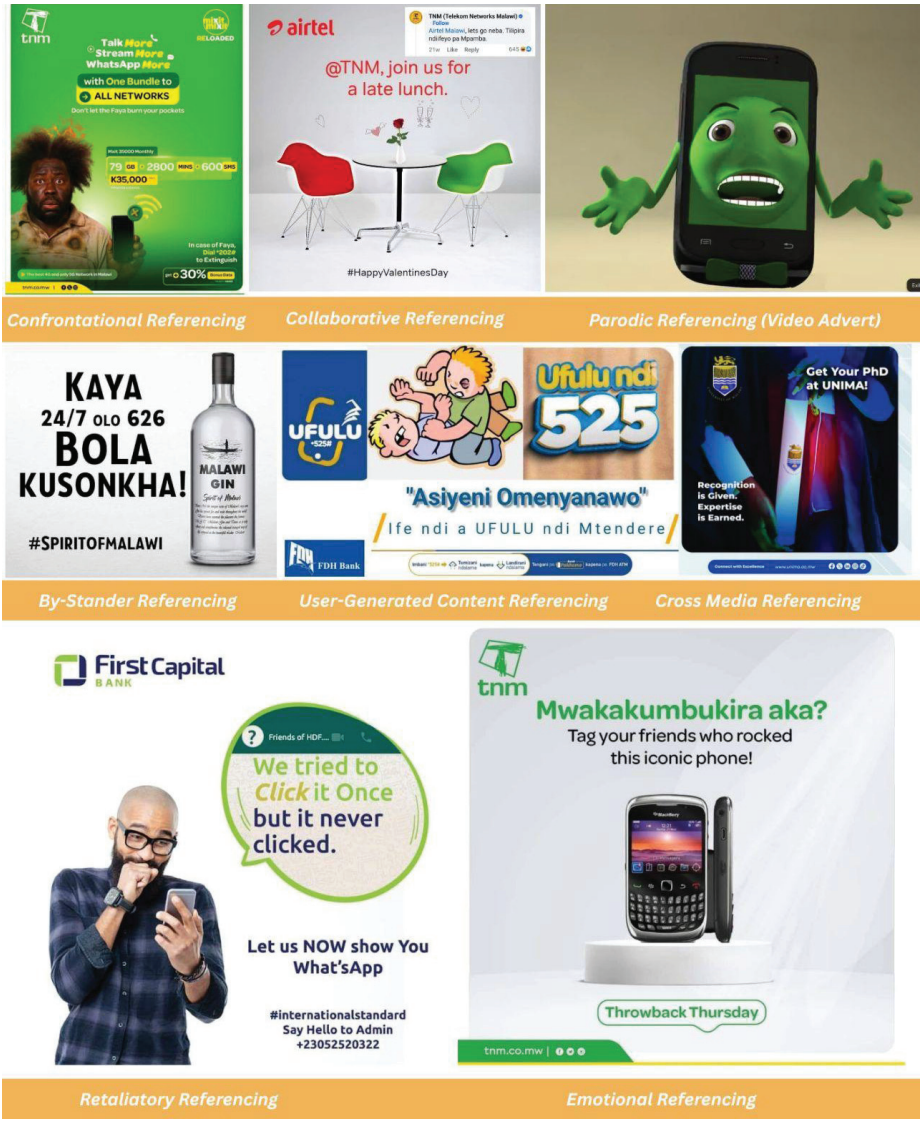

Figure 5: Examples *of Direct Intertextual References in Malawi (Mnela, 2025)*

Figure 6: *Examples of Indirect Intertextual References in Malawi (Mnela, 2025)*

Direct Intertextual References Category

Direct references create a *deliberate* and *recognisable link* between an advert and another identifiable text, brand, or media source. They depend on the *audience's prior exposure* to the original material to shape how the advert is understood. Main forms include:

Confrontational References

These use *tension, conflict, or controversy* to make a point, often by copying, mocking, or challenging a competitor's slogan or style. They thrive on *public attention* and are meant to *differentiate the brand.*

A strong example of *confrontational intertextuality* in Malawi can be seen in the rivalry between *TNM* and *Airtel Malawi. Airtel* launched its popular *Mo Faya* campaign, built around energy, excitement, and youthful confidence. In response, *TNM's Mixit campaign* adopted a *counter-narrative* aimed at *"putting out the fire."* The adverts featured imagery such as fire trucks, burnt figures, and fire extinguishers, paired with phrases like *"stream more," "don't let the fire burn your pockets,"* and *"in case of a faya, dial …"*

Although *Airtel* was never mentioned by name, the references were unmistakable. As shown in the captured digital adverts below, the *TNM's* campaign *visuals* and *language* directly echoed *Airtel's theme*, positioning *TNM* as the *"firefighter"* in the market conversation. This form of *intertextuality* thrives on audience recognition, turning brand rivalry into a public spectacle that fuels attention and engagement.

Let's take a moment to look at the images on the next page. At the top, a young man is shown lying on his back. According to the advert, he is getting *faya'd up (fired up).* In the next advert by *TNM*, the line reads, *"Don't let the Faya burn your pockets"* with a burnt young man holding a dead phone. Another *TNM* advert shows a green fire extinguisher - unusually not red - with the message, *"In case of a fire, dial 202# to extinguish it".* On the opposite side, we see another example with a young woman seen enjoying *TikTok*. This second *Airtel* advert, like the first, features a fire symbol.

The *TNM-Airtel case* qualifies as a *confrontational reference* under *direct intertextual reference* despite *Airtel's* name not appearing in *TNM's* adverts. *Directness in intertextuality is not limited to explicit mention but extends to recognisable cues that leave no doubt about the source being referenced.* The '*Mo Faya'* slogan, fiery imagery, and language had already become culturally distinctive to *Airtel* after months of running the campaign. *TNM's* deliberate use of fire-related symbols - such as fire trucks, burnt characters, and extinguishers - clearly pointed to *Airtel's* campaign as the target.

The *shared vocabulary* and *imagery* created an *unmistakable link* that audiences easily decoded, making the reference direct in both intention and interpretation. A similar case, though not digital, is the *Standard Bank* advert shown in *Figure 8* below. *National Bank* used *Standard Bank's* colours, along with the words *Standard* and *Greatness*, which were strongly tied to the latter's campaigns. In *confrontational intertextuality*, advertisers use different connectors to engage in these brand conversations. Some use shared words, slogans, or slang that audiences immediately recognise (as *TNM* used *Faya* from *Airtel's* campaign). Others employ similar colours, symbols, or imagery to echo or challenge a rival's message (*TNM's* green fire extinguisher instead of the usual red).

Figure 7: *TNM's Clever Confrontational Intertextuality*

By-Stander References

When an advert uses *by-stander intertextuality*, it takes a *neutral stance within an existing cultural or brand conversation*. It acknowledges another text or trend, but claims to be distant and not involved, relying on the audience's awareness of the wider context. Such references often grow out of *confrontational exchanges*, where a third party joins the conversation without appearing to do so. The technique involves seizing a fleeting moment while maintaining the impression of non-involvement. If they are aware of a rivalry between *brand A and B*, then *brand C* can join the exchange while maintaining a degree of *plausible deniability* - that's it.

The 2021 National Bank of Malawi billboard [top image] is a strong example of a 'Confrontational Reference,' sparking widespread online buzz and influencing digital adverts across various sub-categories. User-Generated Content (Image 2) claimed that FDH Bank mocked both brands. In response, FDH stamped 'FAKE' in transparent red, placing it in the By-Stander Reference category (3). Other brands, such as Castel Malawi (4) and (5), also engaged as bystanders, reacting without directly confronting.

Figure 8: *Example Digital Adverts Illustrating Different Intertextual References*

In *Figure 8* above, the *National Bank* billboard (itself employing *Confrontational intertextuality*), among others, saw the emergence of other types of *intertextual references*. Images 3, 4 and 5 illustrate examples of *by-standers*. The *'brand conversation'* was initially about *'greatness'* but within the conversation, *Standard Bank* responded with banter along *"Be Great 24/7, not 6 to 6"*. This was a case of *retaliatory intertextuality* to be described in detail next. After the response, *'neutral brands'*, seeking to exploit the virality of the conversation jumped onto the bandwagon to peddle their own narratives, riding on the traction. As seen in advert 3, *FDH Bank* was drawn into the *'brand conversation'* through a User Generated intertextual advert but dismissed it with a *'Fake'* label. Advert 4 (*Malawi Gin*) and advert 5 (*MRA's Msonkho Online*) built on the *24/7* and *6-to-6* narrative because it touched on the *USSD payment platforms* for both banks - *Standard Bank* uses *247* whereas *National Bank* uses *626*.

Retaliatory References

Retaliatory intertextual adverts respond directly to another advert, parodic or public criticism. They are deliberate, recognisable, and often aimed at defending or reclaiming a brand's image. A clear example is *Standard Bank's* retort to *National Bank's billboard*, asserting: *"Be Great 24/7, not 6 to 6."* Had this claim appeared unprompted, it would have been a *confrontational advert*; its classification depends on both *intention* and *effect*. Overall, *retaliatory references* are defensive in nature.

Figure 5 (bottom left) shows a *First Capital Bank (FCB)* advert *intertexted* to an earlier parodic advert by *FDH Bank*, which promoted being first to launch *WhatsApp banking* (*See Figure 9*). While FCB's advert incorporates *parody*, the fact that its responding shows how *intertextuality* can be layered: a single advert can combine *parody* with a *defensive response* depending on *context* and *purpose*. Timing matters - when one advert follows another, it creates a sense of response or dialogue. These connectors help audiences notice links between adverts, making the communication more layered, connected and engaging.

Parodic References

These adverts *mimic* a familiar text, style, or tone using humour, irony, or exaggeration to subvert the original message or make audiences laugh at its excesses. *Parodic intertextuality* can target a *competing brand, a social issue, or serve as self-critique*. When used for *self-critique*, advertisers expose an institution's limitations with *humour* and *irony*, relying on audiences to recognise the deliberate flaws and engage with the message.

The *Malawi Police Service (MPS)* and *First Capital Bank (FCB)* illustrate this well. The *MPS* released a *poorly designed advert*, explaining the flaw by noting their designer was on *patrol*, turning a limitation into humour. *FCB* used a similarly *"bad design"* to advertise a graphic designer vacancy, ironically highlighting the very gap they sought to fill. Both depend on the audience recognising that the design flaws are intentional, turning parody into a strategic engagement tool that humanises institutions.

Parodic intertextuality can also target competitors. In 2017, *TNM Malawi* released a video advert featuring a fictional mascot resembling *Airtel Money's* well-known *Mr. Money* character. The advert portrayed the character struggling with buffering and missed calls,

problems attributed to rival networks, using humour and exaggeration to critique Airtel while leveraging a *familiar reference* (*See figure 12 below*).

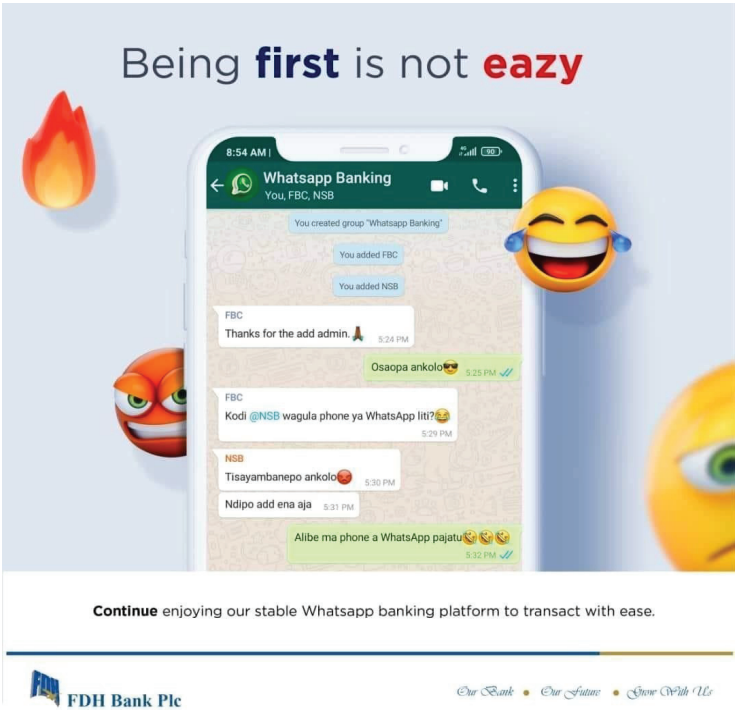

Figure 9: *Example of Parodic Intertextual Advert (FDH Bank)*

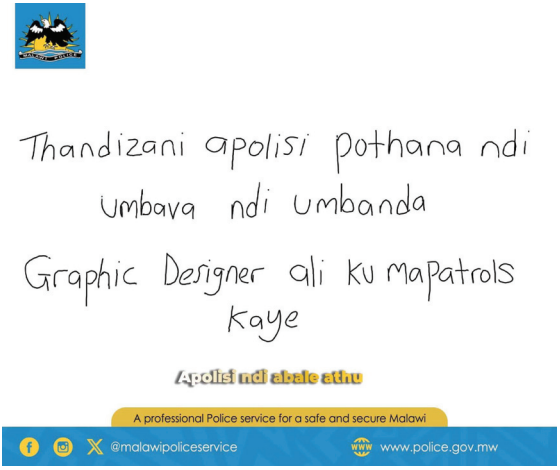
Thandizani apolisi pothana ndi umbava ndi umbanda
Graphic Designer ali ku mapatrols kaye
Apolisi ndi abale athu
A professional Police service for a safe and secure Malawi
@malawipoliceservice
www.police.gov.mw

Figure 10: *Example of Parodic Intertextual Advert (Malawi Police)*

Figure 11: *Example of Parodic Intertextual Advert (FCB)*

As shown in *Figure 12*, the bottom image parodies the *Mr Money* mascot by exaggerating its shift from frustration to satisfaction. The humour comes from this transformation and the familiar telecommunications problems it represents. It is a direct, intentional reference rather than a subtle one.

Two contextual factors strengthen the *intertextual reading*. First, the timing of introducing a mascot when the competitor had long used one suggests a high likelihood of intentional reference. Second, *Airtel* is *TNM's* only *major competitor*, so phrases like *"other networks"* carry a layered but *direct connotation* easily understood by audiences.

Even without identical mascots, the connection is unmistakable. The appropriation of the mascot concept is a *deliberate intertextual act* aimed at creating a *parodic effect* - mocking, yet still within the bounds of acceptable advertising rivalry.

A good advert should provoke conversation about the competing brand. From that discussion, customers and prospects should be able to make informed choices in favour of the advertiser. Otherwise, the effort becomes an exercise in futility. In the example above, the parody works only if it shifts attention from mere humour to brand preference, guiding the audience to see the advertiser as the better alternative.

Marketers must exercise caution when *parodying* a stronger competitor. In *digital spaces*, audiences are not passive; they respond instantly, and often harshly. A *poorly judged parody* can *backfire*, drawing *ridicule* instead of *admiration*. When a weaker brand mocks a dominant competitor, the audience may view it as *desperate* or *unprofessional*. Social media users can quickly "roast" the advertiser, exposing flaws, comparing service quality, and turning the *parody* into a *public embarrassment*. What was meant to entertain can easily become a platform for airing grievances. In the *digital era*, brand respect is earned through credibility, not reckless imitation.

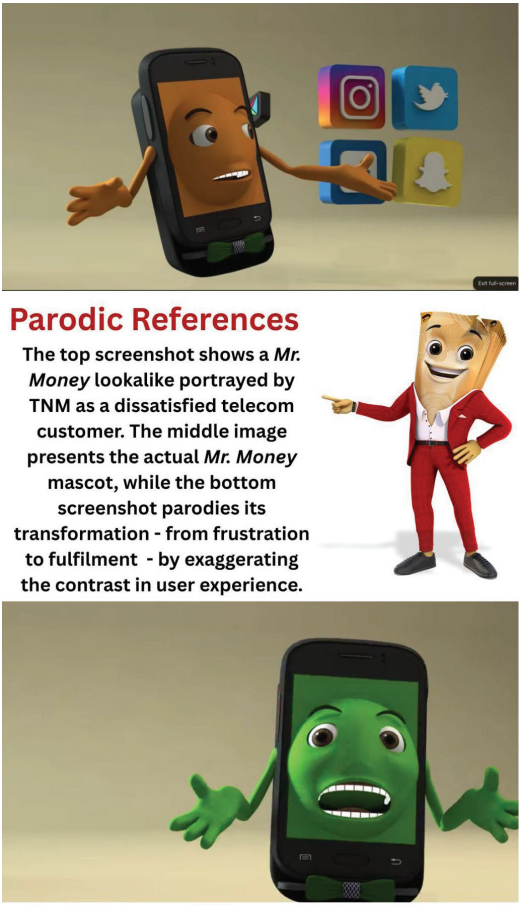
Parodic References
The top screenshot shows a Mr. Money lookalike portrayed by TNM as a dissatisfied telecom customer. The middle image presents the actual Mr. Money mascot, while the bottom screenshot parodies its transformation - from frustration to fulfilment - by exaggerating the contrast in user experience.

Figure 12: An *Example of a Parodic Intertextuality Advertising*

Emotional References

In *emotional referencing*, brands use intertextual elements to connect with audiences through shared emotions or experiences. This form of intertextuality relies on emotional resonance rather than logic, using familiar imagery, songs, or stories to evoke laughter, nostalgia, pride, empathy, or fear. It works by triggering memory and emotion simultaneously, making the message more relatable and memorable.

A good example is the *Malawian Airlines* advert (*Figure 13 below*), which used laughing and curious emojis to represent happy people and create warmth. It draws on familiar

cultural cues - emoji culture and local humour - through a playful line that teases the common overloading in public transport: *Kodi sizingatheke kukhala atatuatatu pampando? (Can't we fit three on a two-seater?)*. The humour also shows a contrast: the chaos often tolerated in road transport would be unacceptable in the highly regulated airline industry.

Joke of the day
Kodi sizingatheke kukhala atatu - atatu pampando kapena kuimilila kuti ticket itchipe, nafe tikafikeko
#FlyMalawiAirlines
www.malawian-airlines.com
Available on the App Store
Google Play
Malawi Airlines

Figure 13: An *Example of Emotional Advertising*

Collaborative References

These appear when brands, influencers, or competitors partner or co-create content. The references are mutual and visible, reinforcing each brand's message through shared association.

Collaborative intertextual referencing occurs when two brands, entities, or parties enter into a mutually beneficial agreement to promote their offerings. This can manifest in various forms, such as *co-branding*, *joint ventures*, *affiliate marketing*, or *cross promotions*. In each case, the core idea is mutual benefit: both brands work together to enhance their market position by leveraging each other's strengths, reaching new audiences, or pooling resources for greater impact. In *February 2024*, *Airtel* and *TNM* caught public attention by exchanging playful *Valentine's Day* messages on social media. The *light-hearted, flirtatious exchange* reflected a rare moment of camaraderie between the two rivals, signalling cooperation rather than competition, as shown in *Figure 14 below*.

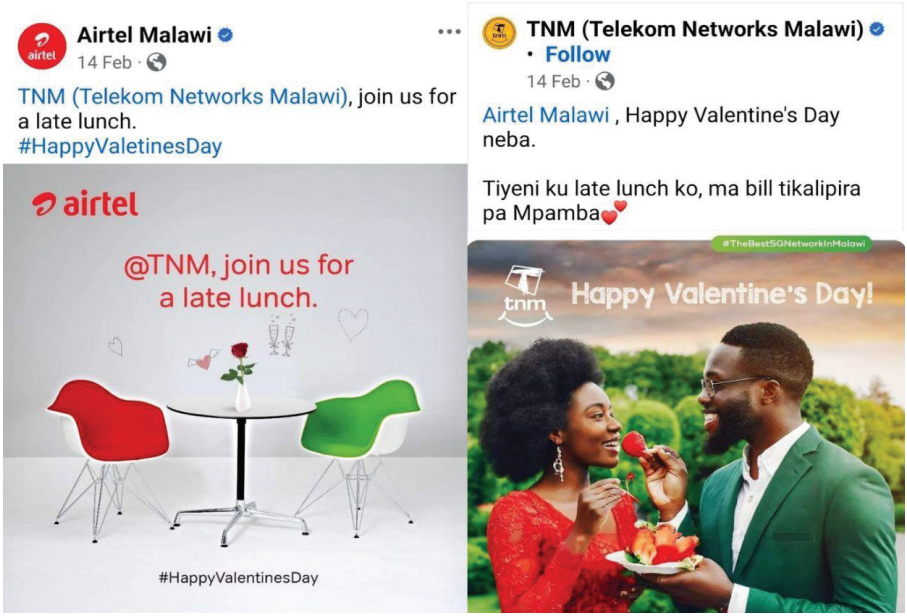

Figure 14: An *Example of Collaborative Intertextual Advertising*

Cross-Media References

Cross-media references connect narratives across TV, print, and social media, letting the same story unfold while keeping a unified message. They draw on other media - press releases, viral clips, or memes - and weave them into advertising.

The *University of Malawi (Unima)* responded to the doctorate degree debate after an *NCHE press release*, using *digital adverts* to extend the conversation creatively (*see Figure 15 below*). Another example involving the alleged *fake PhD controversy* involving social media influencer *Pemphero Mphande* and musician *Patience Namadingo*, sparked by a *University of South Africa (UNISA) press release* denying it had ever awarded honorary *PhDs* to them, saw advertisers referencing this viral story to build relevance and familiarity (*see Figure 16 below*).

Well-executed *cross-media referencing* places brands in ongoing social conversations, blending real events with creative messaging and boosting audience engagement.

Trending topics create fleeting buzz, so timing is crucial. They work best for short-term goals like launches or promotions. For long-term branding, they should be used sparingly and paired with lasting messaging.

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

PRESS RELEASE

27TH MARCH, 2025

STATEMENT ON CONFERMENT AND USE OF HONORARY DOCTORATE DEGREES AND HONORARY PROFESSORSHIPS IN MALAWI

The National Council for Higher Education Act No. 15 of 2011, mandates the National Council for Higher Education (herein "the Council") to regulate higher education institutions in Malawi.

The Council has noted with concern the manner in which individuals are conferred with honorary degrees by both local and foreign higher education institutions (HEIs) or entities, as well as how the recipients of such awards use their titles. The Council has further noted, that most awardees of honorary doctorate degrees use the title "Doctor" (abbreviated as "Dr.") while awardees of honorary professorship use the title "Professor" (abbreviated as "Prof."). It is against this background that the Council wishes to state its position regarding the conferment and use of honorary doctorate degrees and honorary professorships in Malawi.

Honorary Doctorate Degree

An honorary doctorate degree, in Latin honoris causa ("for the sake of the honour") or ad honorem ("to the honour"), is conferred as a way of honouring individuals for their outstanding contribution to a specific field or society in general and not earned through academic achievements. Honorary doctorate degrees do not require a programme of study with defined learning outcomes or set standards. In the absence of clearly defined learning outcomes, approved learning programme and set assessment protocols for issuance of honorary doctorate degrees, such degrees cannot be designated as qualifications but as honours. Honorary degrees are ceremonial awards and are conferred after assessing the impact and significance of the contributions an individual has made in various spheres of life.

Use of Honorary Doctorate Degrees in Malawi

The Council hereby presents guidelines for HEIs and recipients on the award and use of honorary doctorate degrees in Malawi:

a) Honorary doctorate degrees shall only be awarded by accredited higher education institutions whose accreditation status is recognized by the Council.
b) Honorary doctorate degrees shall be conferred upon individuals as special recognition and should not be construed as academic qualifications.
c) The recipient of an honorary doctorate degree should not address himself/herself as 'Doctor'. However, such honours can be placed on the resume under "achievements and awards" section.
d) Members of the academia and the public including the media should not address a recipient of an honorary doctorate degree orally or in writing as 'Doctor'.
e) The guidelines on the use of honorary degrees outlined from 4 (a) to 4(d) should also apply to honorary doctorate degrees awarded by foreign higher education institutions.

Honorary Professorship

The title of honorary professor is a title conferred upon an individual in recognition of a person's special contribution to the subject areas associated with the faculty's academic activities. Honorary professors are not HEI staff nor employees. The Council is, nevertheless, aware that some HEIs, particularly those in the East, confer honorary professorships. In Malawi, no HEI shall confer an honorary professorship. Additionally, honorary professorships shall not be used in Malawi.

The NCHE appeals to all stakeholders, including civil society organisations and members of the general public, to join hands in promoting ethical and legitimate practices in higher education. Let us work together to protect the integrity and dignity of Malawi's higher education.

The full statement, which includes detailed guidelines on this matter, can be accessed on the NCHE website (**https://www.nche.ac.mw**) and official Facebook page (**National Council for Higher Education**).

Dr. Estone Yobe Sambo
COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON

Figure 15: An *Example of Cross-Media Intertextual Advertising*

Figure 16: *Examples of Cross-Media Intertextual Advert Inspired by Unisa Press release*

A related case highlights the strategic value of linking branded content to viral national publications. Journalist *Edith Gondwe's article, "Can You Do Me a Favour,"* published in her *Sunday Nation* column, *Candid Talk*, was later incorporated into multiple digital adverts, most prominently in a *First Capital Bank (FCB)* campaign (*Figure 17*).

The article went *viral* by addressing the topical issue of women frequently asking favours from male colleagues, sparking widespread online discussion. Initial reactions included criticism from female readers, framing the piece as banter against *Gondwe* herself, which persisted for several days. Brands capitalised on this sustained attention, embedding the article's themes into their campaigns to leverage *virality* and *public conversation*. This case demonstrates how aligning branded content with trending or widely discussed media can amplify reach and engagement.

When brands draw from news media to create adverts, they must do so with *restraint* and *responsibility*. *Permission* and *proper attribution* are essential, in cases where *explicit reference* is made as using journalistic material without consent risks legal and ethical breaches.

The original message must be preserved; altering tone or context can distort meaning and damage credibility. *Sensitivity* is vital - brands should avoid exploiting tragedy or controversy for commercial gain. The case of *fake PhD narrative* may be an ideal candidate worth exploring here. As long as the directness is to the trending issue and not the involved individuals, the advertiser may be in the clear.

The advert must not imply endorsement by the media outlet or journalist unless clearly stated. In short, such *cross-media intertextuality* demands cultural awareness and respect for *editorial integrity*. Above all, transparency should guide practice so that audiences can distinguish between reporting and advertising.

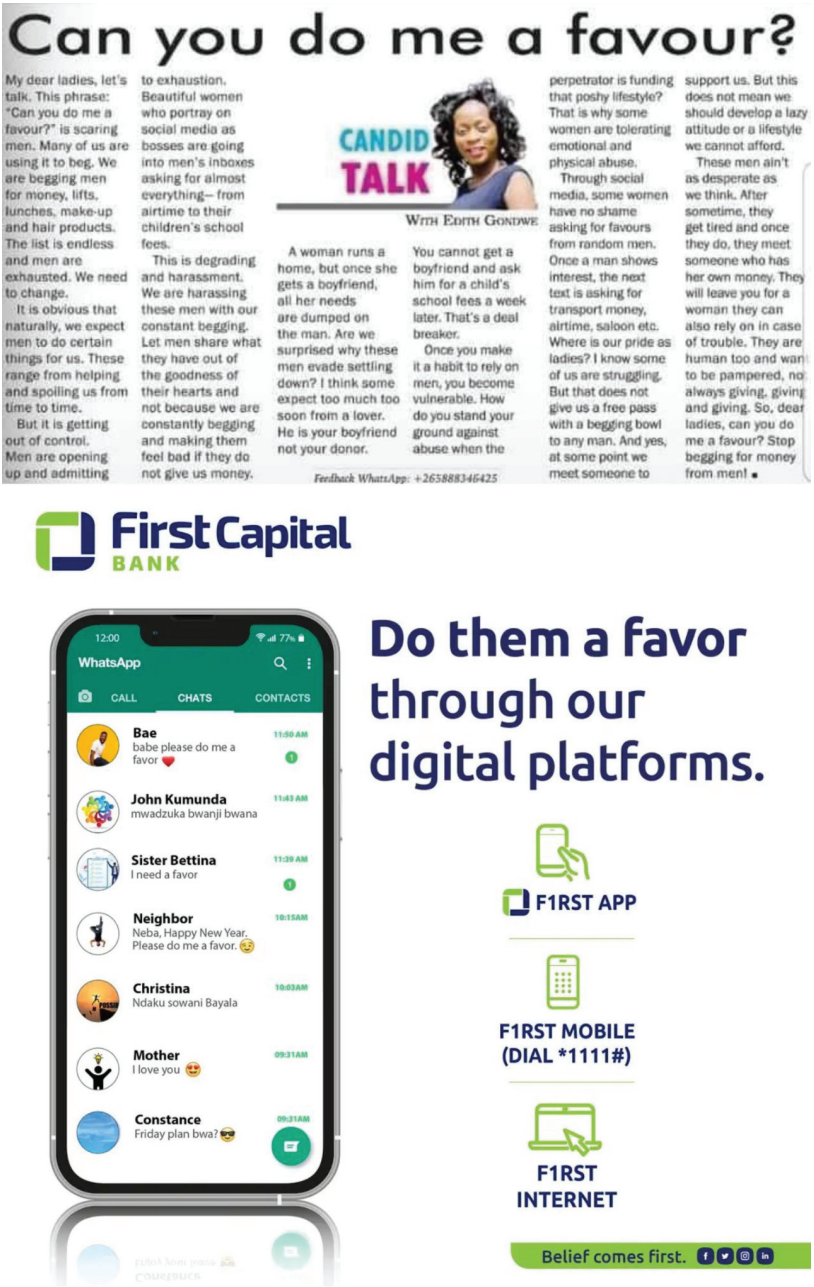
Can you do me a favour?
My dear ladies, let's talk. This phrase: "Can you do me a favour?" is scaring men. Many of us are using it to beg. We are begging men for money, lifts, lunches, make-up and hair products. The list is endless and men are exhausted. We need to change.
It is obvious that naturally, we expect men to do certain things for us. These range from helping and spoiling us from time to time.
But it is getting out of control. Men are opening up and admitting to exhaustion. Beautiful women who portray on social media as bosses are going into men's inboxes asking for almost everything– from airtime to their children's school fees.
This is degrading and harassment. We are harassing these men with our constant begging. Let men share what they have out of the goodness of their hearts and not because we are constantly begging and making them feel bad if they do not give us money.
CANDID TALK
With Edith Gondwe
A woman runs a home, but once she gets a boyfriend, all her needs are dumped on the man. Are we surprised why these men evade settling down? I think some expect too much too soon from a lover. He is your boyfriend not your donor.
You cannot get a boyfriend and ask him for a child's school fees a week later. That's a deal breaker.
Once you make it a habit to rely on men, you become vulnerable. How do you stand your ground against abuse when the perpetrator is funding that poshy lifestyle? That is why some women are tolerating emotional and physical abuse.
Through social media, some women have no shame asking for favours from random men. Once a man shows interest, the next text is asking for transport money, airtime, saloon etc. Where is our pride as ladies? I know some of us are struggling. But that does not give us a free pass with a begging bowl to any man. And yes, at some point we meet someone to support us. But this does not mean we should develop a lazy attitude or a lifestyle we cannot afford.
These men ain't as desperate as we think. After sometime, they get tired and once they do, they meet someone who has her own money. They will leave you for a woman they can also rely on in case of trouble. They are human too and wan to be pampered, no always giving, giving and giving. So, dear ladies, can you do me a favour? Stop begging for money from men! ■
Feedback WhatsApp: +265888346425
First Capital BANK
12:00
WhatsApp
CALL
CHATS
CONTACTS
Bae
babe please do me a favor
11:50 AM
John Kumunda
mwadzuka bwanji bwana
11:43 AM
Sister Bettina
I need a favor
11:39 AM
Neighbor
Neba, Happy New Year. Please do me a favor.
10:15AM
Christina
Ndaku sowani Bayala
10:03AM
Mother
I love you
09:31AM
Constance
Friday plan bwa?
09:31AM
Do them a favor through our digital platforms.
F1RST APP
F1RST MOBILE (DIAL *1111#)
F1RST INTERNET
Belief comes first.

Figure 17: *Examples of Cross-Media Intertextual Advert Inspired by Edith Gondwe's Column*

User-Generated Content (UGC) References

User-Generated Content (UCG) intertextuality uses consumer-created materials such as reviews, videos, or social media posts. Such references add authenticity and build trust by showing real user participation. During the *National Bank–Standard Bank advert exchange*, social media users joined in, creating their own advert that mimicked the brand assets of a legitimate bank. This kind of participation is complex; it sits on the edge between *positive engagement* and *potential harm* to *corporate reputation*. One clever way to manage this is just the way *FDH Bank* handled this particular case as highlighted above (*See Figure 8 above, advert 2 and 3*). Below (*Figure 18*) illustrates *user-generated content (UGC) intertextuality* in practice.

Figure 18: An *Example of UGC Intertextual Advertising*

Brands should monitor and guide *user-generated content* carefully. While audience participation can boost *visibility* and *relatability*, it can also distort brand messaging or cause *reputational risk* if not managed. Clear social media policies, timely engagement, and consistent brand tone help maintain control without discouraging creativity. Encouraging responsible participation ensures that *user-generated intertextuality* supports rather than undermines the brand.

Indirect *Intertextua*l References Category

Indirect references, as the name suggests, work through subtle associations. They draw from cultural memory, social behaviour, or historical moments rather than *explicit texts* or *brands*. The meaning lies in *shared understanding* rather than *direct citation*.

Suspended References

Suspended or delayed intertextuality uses references that reveal meaning gradually. The connection develops through pacing, narrative build-up, or symbolic hints. The aim is to

spark curiosity and anticipation before the full message becomes clear. For example, the *FDH Bank* advertisement in *Figure 19* shows a concealed motor vehicle, prompting speculation and interest - what kind of car is it, and what does the phrase *"one is good…"* suggest? This approach ignites conversation and keeps audiences alert for the brand's next move.

Figure 19: An *Example of Delayed/Suspended Intertextual Advertising*

During the initial study that informed publications on this topic, *suspended intertextuality* emerged as one of the more effectively used reference types. However, even seasoned marketers sometimes misapplied it. In one case, an institution released a *delayed intertextual advert* announcing a forthcoming paid event without revealing what the event was all about. This likely caused confusion, as audiences were asked to pay for something not yet explained - *undermining the intended intrigue and weakening engagement*. In situations where full disclosure is essential, particularly when a fee is involved, this technique should be avoided unless the suspense builds around a discount, exclusive offer, or special reveal that clearly benefits the audience.

Cultural References

Cultural intertextuality is crucial. It draws on local traditions, languages, symbols, and practices. Culture is a sensitive area, and *even well-intentioned campaigns can backfire if local norms and perceptions are overlooked.* Advertisers must carefully consider who represents cultural symbols, how they are portrayed, and whether the message resonates authentically with the community. Missteps, even the most innocent ones, can quickly overshadow the intended celebration and damage *brand credibility*.

Figure 20: An *Example of Cultural Intertextual Advertising*

In 2024, *TNM* launched a *Culture Day campaign* celebrating Malawi's heritage. Though well-intentioned, the advert sparked backlash on *Facebook*. It featured *a white, non-native CEO dressed as a Ngoni chief seated on a throne*. What was meant to honour culture was widely viewed as *culturally insensitive and tone-deaf*, drawing strong criticism online. The advert (*shown in Figure 20 above*) was later taken down following public outrage, much of which was based on misinterpretation. This case shows that *intertextuality* is not about factual correctness, but about ensuring audiences connect with and accept the message.

Historical References

Historical intertextuality draws on past events, national heroes, or historic symbols. In Malawi, figures like *John Chilembwe, Kamuzu Banda and others* are often featured in advertising to evoke patriotism, pride, or a sense of legacy. Chilembwe's image, seen on currency and commemorated annually, conveys bravery and national identity when incorporated into brand messaging.

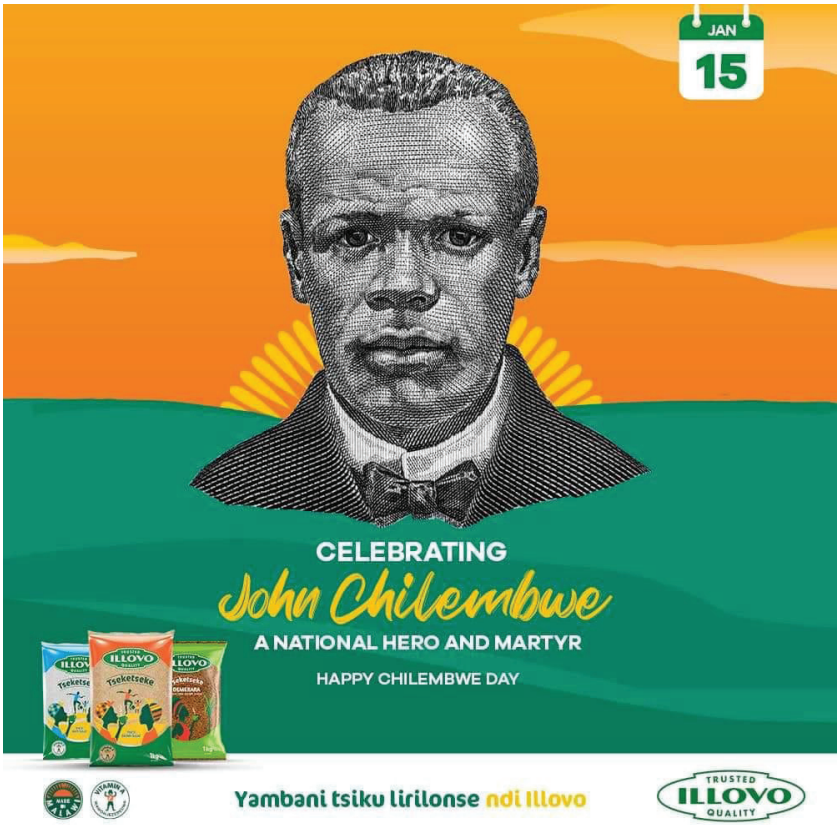

Figure 21: An *Example of Historical Intertextual Advertising*

Using *politically* or *religiously sensitive historical figures* such as the *Dalai Lama, Yasser Arafat, or Jesus Christ* in adverts can provoke strong backlash. These individuals carry *deep symbolic meaning* for different communities, and featuring them in commercial content risks offending cultural, religious, or political sentiments. Advertisers should avoid exploiting such figures for profit, as respect for these sensitivities is essential to prevent *public outrage* and *reputational harm*.

A similar caution applies when *visual intertextuality* distorts national memory. For instance, Chibuku, a popular alcoholic beverage brand in Malawi, once ran a *Martyrs' Day advert* showing armed soldiers raising a flag - an image reminiscent of the American victory at *Iwo Jima*. The advert drew public criticism from social commentator *Onjezani Kenani*, who noted that Malawi's independence was achieved through peaceful civilian protest, not military action. Such cases show a loss of historical accuracy, where borrowed images distort or oversimplify local history. This happens when past events or figures are taken out of context and used in adverts without respect for their true meaning or cultural significance.

Onjezani Kenani
@onjezani
Follow
Dear Chibuku,
There was no soldier who fought for our freedom, only unarmed people in the streets. Leave these images to the Americans and their victory at Iwo Jima.
Chibuku
Commemorating
Martyrs' Day
3RD MARCH
"Honoring the brave souls who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. Their legacy lives on"
Your trusted brand for over 60years

Figure 22: An *Example of Historical Intertextual Advertising*

This kind of feedback, as uncharitable as it sounds, highlights the need for clear systems to guide the *proper use of intertextuality* - beyond *generic templates* or *poorly informed storytelling*.

Subtle parodic reference

Subtle parody referencing in advertising draws on familiar images, styles, or cultural habits to create humour or commentary without directly imitating or mocking the source. Its effectiveness depends on audience awareness - the viewer must recognise the similarity and understand the message behind it. These references are understated and often rely on shared cultural or professional understanding.

A clear example is the *Coca-Cola* advert showing a *Coke* bottle at the centre of flashing cameras, as if it were a celebrity on a red carpet. The caption *"the star of the show"* reinforces this idea. The parody is light and playful, using the glamour and attention of celebrity culture to spotlight a soft drink.

Figure 23: An *Example of Subtle-Parodic Intertextual Advertising*

Narrative Intertextual Referencing

Narrative intertextual advertising uses stories to stir emotion and influence consumer behaviour. Strong stories make adverts more engaging, shareable, and memorable. Myths and familiar storylines act as cultural shortcuts, linking brands to themes people already understand and care about. Consumers also share their own stories about brands, often without realising it, which makes those brands feel more personal and meaningful.

Narrative intertextuality builds on storytelling by using familiar plots or character types to express a brand's message. These stories often show struggle, progress, or transformation that mirrors the customer's experience. For instance, a narrative banking video (*see Figure 24*) from the *National Bank of Malawi's Facebook page* features *Rose Chisowa*, a small-scale farmer and business owner overcoming challenges with the bank's support - told like a short, uplifting film. Such stories focus on shared experiences and social themes, making them relatable and emotionally engaging for audiences.

Figure 24: An *Example of Narrative Intertextual Advertising*

Chisowa's story highlights the impact of the bank's financial services and how they helped her farming business grow. This example fits the *"Rags to Riches"* and *"Transformation"* story types. It portrays progress and empowerment, using a familiar narrative pattern to make the brand's impact both credible and inspiring.

The strength of this *intertextual reference* lies in its subtlety. The advertiser communicates value without appearing to sell. By telling authentic stories, they attract attention and interest, drawing audiences toward their services naturally rather than through overt promotion. *Figure 6* illustrates *narrative-driven intertextuality* through *dark humour*, depicting a man who humorously plans his own funeral while promoting a funeral policy.

Implicit User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-generated content (UGC) intertextuality is now central to *digital advertising*, especially on platforms like *Facebook*, where users actively shape brand stories. Unlike traditional brand messaging, UGC features real audience voices - memes, reviews, images, and short videos - bringing authenticity and social proof.

A growing trend is *implicit UGC*, where brands adopt audience-created styles, formats, or trends without directly acknowledging the creators. This can include viral challenges, slang, or humour. While it helps brands stay relevant, it also raises ethical concerns around recognition and consent, sometimes blurring the line between tribute and appropriation. The example below illustrates how *implicit UGC* operates. It also shows how consumers shape and interact with brand narratives online.

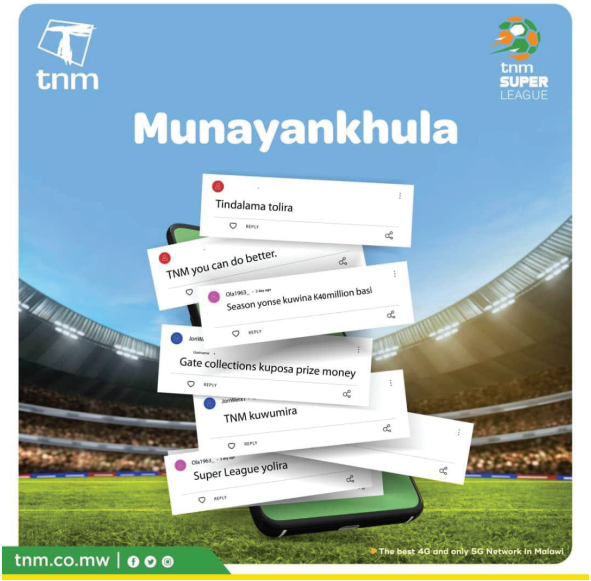

Figure 25: An *Example of Implicit UGC Intertextual Advertising*

In the example advert shown in *Figure 25*, *TNM* engaged in *self-mockery* by incorporating audience posts. The campaign responded to growing criticism over the low prize money for the *TNM Super League*. By highlighting comments such as *"TNM kuumira" (TNM is not generous)*, *"tindalama tolira" (paltry prize money)*, *"TNM you can do better"*, and *"Super League yolira" (broke Super League)*, the brand positively exposed itself to vulnerability while signalling that it listens to its audience. This approach positions TNM as a responsive and culturally aware brand, turning critique into engagement. The post generated a lot of goodwill feedback in the build up to the announcement of the new hiked prize money.

Best practices for this kind of intertextual reference include asking permission, anonymising personal details, crediting creators, highlighting top content, and encouraging participation to boost engagement.

Subtle UGC should not be confused with traditional *UGC*. *Subtle UGC* occurs when a brand appropriates or repurposes content created by users, rather than featuring it directly.

Comparative References

Comparative advertising highlights a brand's strengths by referencing competitors, but it comes with risks. While it can inform consumers and encourage competition, it may also invite legal challenges or damage a brand's reputation if done poorly. The key is *truthfulness* and *careful substantiation* - claims must be *accurate* and *defensible*.

Figure 26: An *Example of Comparative Intertextual Advertising*

In practice, *comparative intertextuality* subtly positions a brand as better by pointing to the perceived weaknesses of others. In Malawi, this is common in mobile network or remittance service adverts. For example, a mobile network may highlight its superior coverage or reliability without naming competitors directly, implying that its services outperform the rest of the market.

Temporal References

Temporal intertextuality uses time-based cues - such as holidays, exam periods, or seasonal weather - to place advertising within shared cultural moments. In Malawi, digital adverts often align messaging with events like *Independence Day*, the rainy season, or exam time, making campaigns feel timely and relevant. This approach, seen in other emerging markets as well, strengthens engagement by connecting the brand to familiar moments in people's lives. Linking messages to specific events or seasons ensures that *temporal references* create *immediacy* and *cultural resonance*, helping consumers relate to and remember the brand.

First Capital
BANK
CLOSED
For Easter
We will be closed on
Friday
18th Apr 2025
and on
Monday
21st Apr 2025
Please note that we will be open on Saturday, 19th April.
Please make use of our digital platforms for all your banking needs:
Mobile App
Internet Banking
Dial *1111#
Botswana • Malawi • Mozambique • Zambia • Zimbabwe
First Capital Bank Plc is licensed and regulated by the Reserve Bank of Malawi.
Belief comes first.

Figure 27: An *Example of Temporal Intertextual Advertising*

Electronic Word of Mouth Spillover References (eWOM Spillover)

eWOM spillover referencing is a technique in Malawian digital advertising where brands leverage existing online content and consumer excitement rather than creating entirely new concepts from scratch. Adverts tap into ongoing conversations or trends related to the brand, theme or topic. For example, the *meerkat trend*, which started in *Kenya* and *Nigeria*, quickly spread across Sub-Saharan Africa. Malawian brands joined in, producing their own content to ride the buzz and engage audiences already talking about it.

institute of marketing in malawi
3 DAYS TO GO!
Watching people who haven't renewed their membership posting me on the group.
Renew your IMM Membership Today!
your way up!
Institute of Marketing in Malawi
www.imm.mw
+265 (0) 991 008 388

Figure 28: An *Example of eWoM Spillover Intertextual Advertising*

Another clear illustration is the *Airtel Kenya* advertisement (see screenshots below), which used red and green to contrast untrustworthy and trustworthy traders, encouraging a switch to a more reliable provider. The green visually referenced *Safaricom*, creating initial ambiguity. The advert unexpectedly gained traction in Malawi, where *TNM - Airtel's* competitor - also uses green branding, even though the advert was never officially distributed there. Its spread through *electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)* showed that the perceived *"confrontation"* in Malawi was *audience-driven*, not *brand-initiated*.

Peer sharing and *interpretation*, rather than deliberate competitive intent, drove its relevance and reach.

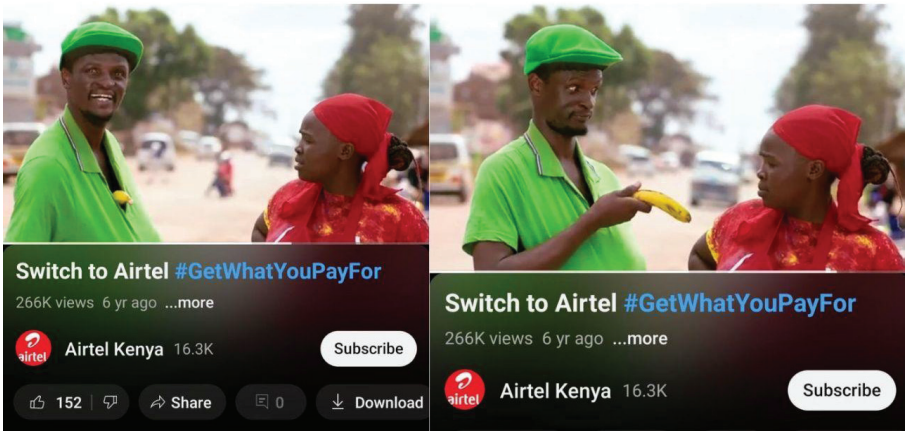

Figure 29: Another *Example of eWoM Spillover Intertextual Advertising*

Gamified References

Gamified intertextuality is a type of indirect referencing involving the use of puzzles, quizzes, or other interactive elements to engage audiences. When references include cultural stories, symbols, or popular media, they move beyond simple interaction and become a form of *intertextual advertising.*

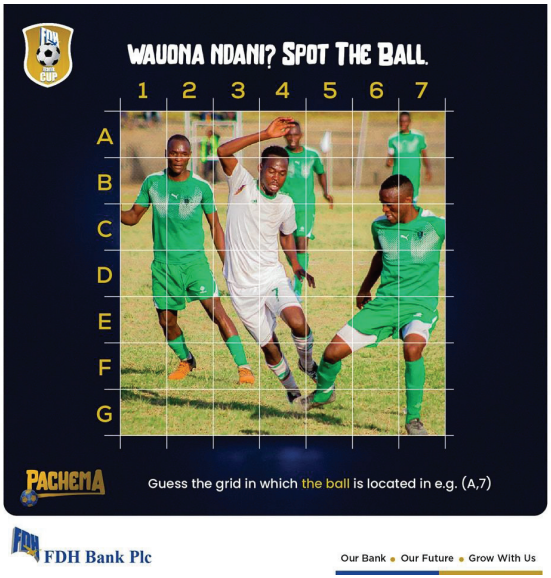

Figure 30: An *Example of Gamified Intertextual Advertising*

Linking gameplay to familiar brands, cultural symbols, or media references allows gamified campaigns to increase engagement while reinforcing the connection between the brand, local culture, and audience interests. In the *FDH Bank* advert above (*see Figure 30*), the ball is blurred out, and viewers must identify the column where it was. In this way, the campaign transforms a simple game into an interactive experience that draws attention to the brand while engaging audiences through challenge and cultural context.

This *indirect referencing* strengthens the connection between the brand, local culture, and audience interests, making the message memorable, engaging, and socially relevant without appearing pushy or commercial.

Non-Referential (No Intertextuality) Category

Some adverts stand alone. They do not borrow external meanings but rely entirely on original messaging. These are common in informational or corrective advertising. Examples include the following:

Service Communication

Service communication refers to messaging that keeps customers informed about the availability, price, quality, or status of a service. Notifying users about prices or planned promotions helps manage expectations, maintain trust, and reduce frustration. This is illustrated by the *Sana Cash n Carry Supermarket advert* shown in *Figure 31*.

Figure 31: An *Example of Service Communication and Brand Communication Advert*

Brand Communication

Brand communication focuses on defining or reinforcing a brand's values and identity. In the Escom advert above, the power utility encourages audiences to explore and experience its 360-degree digital platforms, highlighting innovation and customer engagement as core brand qualities.

Crisis Communication

Crisis communication covers any messaging that addresses an urgent issue affecting stakeholders, aiming to manage reputation, provide information, and reduce negative impact. For example, when a utility like the *Lilongwe Water Board (LWB)* announces the restoration of water supply after an outage, contamination, or system failure, it is responding to an operational crisis. Such an announcement informs the public, reassures customers, and demonstrates responsiveness - key objectives of effective crisis communication.

Supply Has Been Restored. Thank You For Your Patience
LILONGWE WATER BOARD
Potable Water All The Time For All
CALL 253 | www.lwb.mw

Figure 32: An *Example of Crisis Communication Advert*

Chapter 3

Building an *Intertextual Campaign* Using the Campaign Cycle

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we explored how marketers use *intertextual references* to enrich digital adverts, making them more relatable and engaging by drawing on existing media, culture, and narratives. In this chapter, we focus on how to leverage that knowledge to design a full campaign built around *intertextual references*.

The goal is to show how *intertextuality* can transform ordinary advertising into *culturally resonant* storytelling. A well-planned campaign not only communicates the brand's message but also engages audiences through shared knowledge, familiar media, and cultural touchpoints. In Malawi, social and cultural contexts are deeply intertwined with media consumption. Understanding how to design such campaigns is, therefore, critical. The steps that follow provide a practical guide for putting together an effective intertextual campaign.

Define Campaign Objectives

Every campaign begins with clarity. Brands must identify what they hope to achieve - whether raising awareness, increasing engagement, driving sales, or building reputation. *Intertextuality* should serve these goals. For instance, TNM's use of *self-mockery* in its *Super League* adverts aimed to *boost engagement* and *reinforce a listening brand identity*, rather than directly promoting a product.

Objectives could include increasing brand awareness, driving sales, boosting engagement, or shifting brand perception. Ensure objectives are SMART - *Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Intertextual references* should directly support these goals, whether by evoking emotion, reinforcing credibility, or encouraging audience participation.

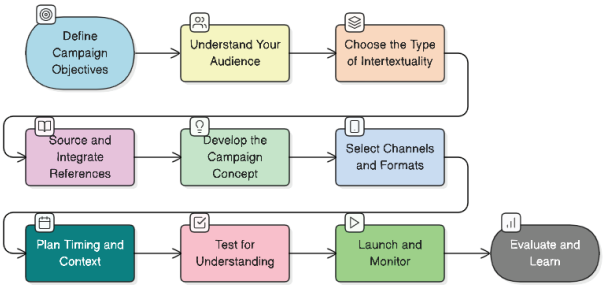

Figure 33: An *Intertextual Campaign Cycle*

Understand Your Audience

Thorough research of your target audience is essential. Identify their demographics, cultural background, values, media consumption habits, and prior knowledge. *Intertextuality* relies on shared understanding, so only those familiar with the referenced content will fully grasp its meaning. Monitoring online conversations, trending memes, and viral topics provides insight into what resonates and guides the selection of culturally relevant references.

Choose the Type of Intertextuality

Intertextuality can take many forms, and not every approach works for every campaign. Decide whether to incorporate a specific type of *reference* or to run a *non-referential* campaign. The table below presents a *categorisation of intertextual* references in Malawi, developed by the author through detailed research.

Category	*Sub-Category*	*Defining Features*
Direct	**Confrontational**	*A deliberate strategy built on conflict, mocking or challenging a competitor or rival brand.*
	Parodic	*Humorous imitation of a well-known text, trend, or platform*
	By-Stander	*Referenced other brands passively without direct challenge, usually to show market context.*
	Retaliatory	*Response to a previous advert, message, or competitor claim*
	Collaborative	*Featuring another brand or organisation in a cooperative way*
	Cross-Media	*Linking or drawing on content from another medium or platform*
	UGC (Direct)	*Clear use of consumer-created content like memes or hashtags*
	Emotional	*Invoked strong cultural, religious, or patriotic emotions through recognisable intertextual cues.*
Indirect	**Cultural**	*References to local customs, language,*

		celebrities, dress, religion, or proverbs
	Historical	*Echoes of national figures, holidays, events, or past struggles*
	Narrative	*Use of storylines, plot structure, or character types familiar in local storytelling*
	Subtle Parodic	*Soft, implied humour without clear mockery*
	Suspended or Delayed	*Meaning unfolds slowly or is revealed in later parts of the advert*
	Temporal	*References tied to specific times - holidays, political cycles, deaths, or economic seasons*
	Gamified	*The audience must actively decode the reference rather than being directly told.*
	eWOM Spillover	*References gain relevance through unintended local associations - such as shared brand colours, cultural symbols, or market conditions.*
	Comparative	*Suggesting superiority without naming the competitor*
	UGC (Subtle)	*Style inspired by users (e.g., meme formats) without explicit credit*
No Reference	**Service Highlights**	*Focused on features, pricing, or utility*
	Crisis Communication	*Crisis Management Communications*
	General Branding	*Use of slogans, logos, or mission statements without external reference*

Figure 34: *Definition Matrix for Intertextual References*

Source and Integrate References

Identify the specific *"texts"* you will reference - *images, slogans, sounds, cultural symbols, or media content*. Integrate these seamlessly into your campaign so they enhance rather than

overshadow your message. Ensure references are culturally appropriate, legally cleared, and ethically used.

Develop the Campaign Concept

Translate references into a creative concept that communicates the brand message effectively. Storyboards, mock-ups, or scripts help visualise how the references will appear. Ensure the references enhance rather than overshadow the brand's message.

Select Channels and Formats

Decide where and how to deliver the campaign, focusing on digital platforms. *Social media* channels such as *Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter)* offer different engagement opportunities, while formats can include *videos, images, memes, polls, or interactive content*. The choice should align with where the target audience is most active and receptive.

Plan Timing and Context

Align the campaign with *cultural moments, seasonal events, or trending topics*. Timing can make intertextual references more immediate and relevant. Avoid careless or imported references that audiences may not understand, as these can backfire.

Test for Understanding

Pre-testing ensures audiences interpret references correctly. Small focus groups or online surveys can reveal misunderstandings. *Historical or cultural references* must be checked to avoid controversy, as seen when *Chibuku's Martyrs' Day* advert drew criticism for misrepresenting Malawi's history - a clear risk of misaligned references.

Launch and Monitor

During the campaign, *track engagement, shares, sentiment, and audience reactions*. Monitor for misinterpretations or backlash through *social listening* and *sentiment analysis*, and have a response plan ready. In crisis situations, such as a controversial advert, prompt communication can protect the brand's reputation while sustaining engagement. The stronger the processes in the *"Test for Understanding phase"*, the better the overall performance of the campaign.

Evaluate and Learn

After the campaign concludes, evaluate it against your initial objectives. Identify what worked, what did not, and how the *intertextual strategy* contributed to outcomes. Document lessons learned to refine future campaigns and enhance your approach to *intertextuality*.

Chapter 4

The *Intertextuality-Driven Advertising Cycle (IDAC)* Framework

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we explored how marketers can put together a campaign that employs *intertextual references* to enrich digital adverts. Closely linked to this process is the *Intertextuality-Driven Advertising Cycle (IDAC) Framework*. This is a framework developed by the author in a quest to have a well-rounded approach to managing *intertextual campaigns*. It can be used before, during and after execution of the campaign.

Introduction to *IDAC*

The framework was developed by the author specifically for digital and interactive advertising. As shown in *Figure 35*, it builds on the traditional *AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action)* at its core. Beyond this, the *IDAC* examines an advert's quality and purpose by analysing language, aesthetics, symbols, and intertextual references, while also assessing relevance through key market and environmental factors using the *C-STRIKE framework*.

IDAC provides a structured approach for brands to draw on texts, media, symbols, or cultural narratives to engage audiences in a fast-paced digital environment. Developed from a grounded theory study of Malawian digital adverts, it bridges theory and practice, demonstrating how familiar references and shared meanings can strengthen brand storytelling and make adverts culturally resonant. The model is organised into four distinctive layers.

Layer 1 - The AIDA Layer

As shown in the figure below, the first layer is based on the classic *AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model*, guiding campaigns to capture attention, engage interest, stimulate desire, and prompt action. It addresses the core psychological journey of the consumer.

Layer 2 - The Language, Aesthetics and Semiotics Layer

The second layer explores *semiotics, language, and aesthetics*. It examines how signs, symbols, and visual elements convey meaning, how language is strategically used, and

how overall *aesthetics* shape interpretation. This ensures communication is clear, culturally relevant, and visually engaging.

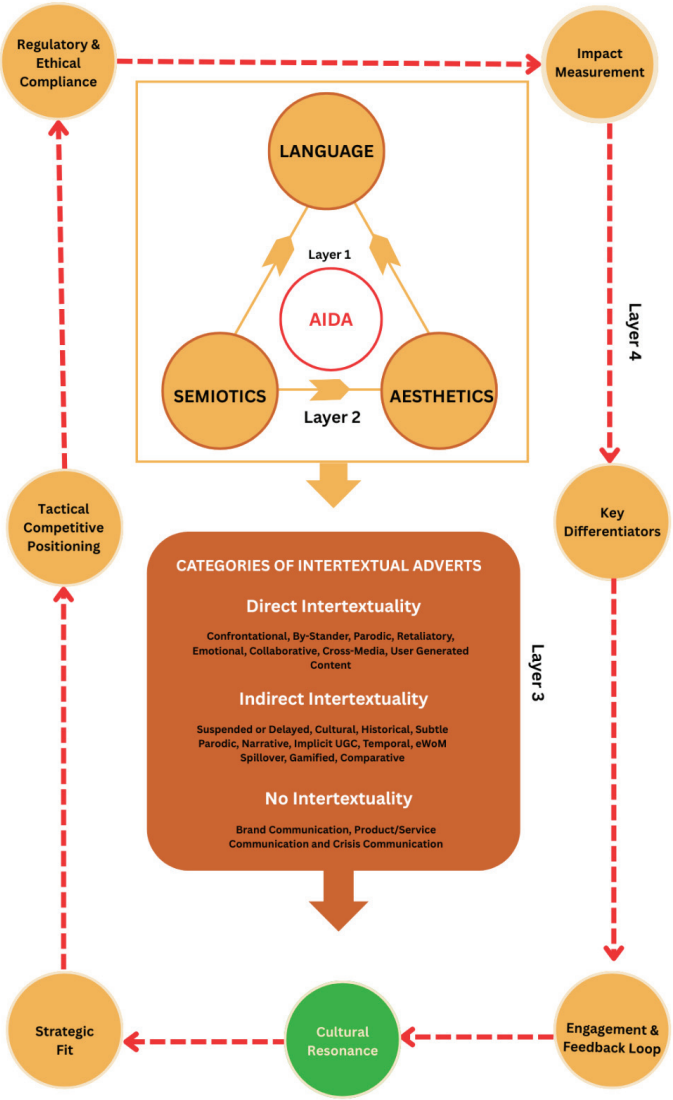

Figure 35: *The Intertextuality-Driven Advertising Cycle (IDAC) Model*

Layer 3 - The *Intertextual* Reference Layer

The *third layer* introduces *intertextuality*, explaining how adverts borrow meaning from other texts. *Intertextuality* in advertising can be divided into three main types as outlined

earlier. *Direct references* involve obvious links to existing phrases, brands, or characters, and include *confrontational, by-stander, parodic, retaliatory, emotional, collaborative, cross-media, and user-generated content*. *Indirect references* are more subtle, drawing on cultural memory, historical events, or societal norms, such as *suspended or delayed references, cultural, historical, subtle parodic, narrative, implicit UGC, temporal, eWoM spillover, gamified, and comparative references*. Finally, *non-referential content* stands alone without borrowing from other texts, including service, brand, or crisis communication.

Overall, this layer ensures that campaigns strategically leverage shared knowledge and cultural context to strengthen audience connection.

Layer 4 - *C-STRIKE* Layer

The fourth layer is the *C-STRIKE framework*, which evaluates and refines the *intertextual choices* made in a campaign. Each reference is assessed for its *cultural resonance/relevance*, ensuring it resonates with the target audience's shared experiences, values, and social context. *Strategic alignment* considers whether the advert supports the broader marketing and business objectives, while *tactical competitive advantage* examines how the reference helps the brand stand out against rivals.

The framework also emphasises *regulatory compliance and ethics*, ensuring adverts adhere to local advertising laws and ethical standards. *Impact measurability* focuses on tracking and evaluating the effectiveness of the *intertextual elements*, and *key differentiation* highlights what makes the brand unique in the market. Finally, *evaluation of audience response* looks at how consumers interpret and react to the advert, providing insights that guide future campaign adjustments.

Together, this layer ensures that *intertextual campaigns* are not only creative and engaging but also strategically sound, culturally appropriate, and effective in achieving their objectives. This layer guarantees that campaigns are creative, engaging, ethically sound, and strategically effective in achieving their objectives.

Purpose-Driven Referencing

In *IDAC*, *intertextual references* are intentional, not random. The framework shifts attention from merely categorising adverts by reference type - *confrontational, retaliatory, parody, electronic word of mouth spillover, or gamified intertextuality* - to understanding the purpose behind each reference.

It asks: *"What does the advert aim to achieve by referencing another text or symbol?"*

This makes the model actionable for marketers. For example, parody may serve to entertain, confront, retaliate, or subtly comment, and *IDAC* distinguishes these distinctions based on intent. *Purpose-driven referencing* ensures that campaigns resonate with audiences while maintaining strategic and ethical alignment.

Benefits of Using *IDAC*

The *IDAC* offers several advantages for marketers, researchers, and regulators. It provides a structured approach to *analysing intertextual references*, moving beyond vague descriptions to achieve analytical precision. By doing so, it improves campaign design, helping creative and management teams make deliberate choices about references that engage audiences while avoiding offence.

The framework also serves as an ethical guide, supporting practitioners and regulators in distinguishing between homage and infringement, and promoting responsible, respectful advertising.

In addition, *IDAC* enhances measurability by enabling the tracking of tone, frequency, and effectiveness of *intertextual references* across campaigns and platforms. Grounded in the Malawian advertising context, it further ensures contextual relevance, showing how *intertextuality* operates in real local practice rather than abstract theory.

BANJA LAMTSOGOLO
Children by choice, not chance
Do you know how to wear a condom?
Call Us on 1131 Toll Free (TNM) | Whatsapp Us on 0880-185-060
www.banjalamtsogolo.org

Figure 36: *BLM Banana-Wearing Condom Advert*

Using the *IDAC*, BLM's advert in *Figure 36* above raises ethical concerns. A banana with a condom can promote safe sex if framed respectfully, but in Malawi's context of *poverty* and *food insecurity*, it risks being seen as insensitive, particularly if used for humour or commercial purposes. On *Facebook*, the advert drew negative feedback for importing foreign approaches, and featuring a white male reinforced this perception, shifting focus from the health message to criticism of the brand's cultural impact.

Chapter 5

The Ethics of *Intertextual* References: Applying *IDAC* in Practice

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we examined how marketers can apply the *Intertextuality-Driven Advertising Cycle (IDAC)* to regulate, strengthen, and evaluate *intertextual campaigns*. The framework has significant potential to help advertisers create messages that are both effective and ethically sound. Within the *C-STRIKE layer*, the *Regulatory and Ethical Component* assesses how a reference aligns with national laws and societal norms.

Advertising goes beyond persuasion; it participates in a cultural dialogue between brands and society. It's not just about clever slogans or striking visuals - messages must reflect and respect the audience's values, beliefs, and lived realities. Failing to do so risks backlash, rejection, or being seen as unethical.

Ethical awareness remains central to responsible advertising. In a fast-moving digital environment where content can shape public opinion within minutes, marketers must focus not only on capturing attention but also on maintaining trust. The *IDAC* provides a practical structure for balancing creativity with moral responsibility. Applied to the *BLM condom advert in Figure 36*, *uBuntu, communitarian, and deontological ethics* highlight its ethical shortcomings. While the intent to promote safe sex aligns with duty-based principles, the use of a banana in a context of poverty and featuring a white male risks disrespecting local culture and community values. A campaign honouring people, culture, and truth would frame sexual health education sensitively, avoiding imagery or narratives that could alienate or offend the audience.

Currently, advertising regulation in Malawi is unclear, with loosely enforced laws and no consolidated regulatory framework, whether mandatory or voluntary. The establishment of the *Institute of Marketing in Malawi (IMM)* and its advocacy for dedicated marketing legislation could signal a significant step toward structured and accountable oversight.

Applying Ethics: Foundations

Generally, digital advertising in Malawi operates within a framework shaped by both regulation and social expectations. Institutions such as the *Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA),* the *Competition and Fair Trading Commission (CFTC)* and the *Malawi Bureau of Standards (MBS)* provide guidelines to prevent content that violates public decency, misinformation, misleading claims, and exploitation. Ethical advertising is anchored in truthfulness, fairness, and respect for the public.

Honesty is a *non-negotiable principle in advertising. Exaggeration or deception* can destroy a *brand's credibility* faster than any formal penalty. For example, promoting a health supplement with unverified medical claims not only misleads consumers but can attract sanctions from institutions such as the *Malawi Bureau of Standards (MBS)*, established by an *Act of Parliament*. Yet in today's era of high engagement and *electronic word of mouth (eWOM)*, the consequences of public backlash can be far worse than regulatory action - damaging trust, reputation, and long-term market standing.

Ethical responsibility requires that every claim be supported by verifiable evidence, allowing consumers to make informed choices. It also extends to social representation. A cosmetics advert implying that lighter skin is superior reinforces harmful stereotypes and erodes *public confidence*. Ethical advertising must, therefore, uphold dignity, diversity, and social harmony. In the digital environment, where audience reactions are instant and amplified, even a *minor ethical lapse can escalate into a full-blown brand crisis within hours*.

uBuntu, Communitarian, and Deontological Ethics

Ethical advertising needs to always be grounded in values that reflect its society. Three key traditions - *uBuntu, communitarian ethics, and deontological ethics* - provide a balanced moral foundation for applying *intertextuality responsibly*.

uBunthu

uBuntu (The Malawian Way) represents the spirit of *interconnectedness* and *shared humanity*. It reminds advertisers that communication is not just persuasion but participation in community life. Campaigns guided by *uBuntu* should build unity, mutual respect, and empathy, avoiding divisive humour, cultural misrepresentation, or exploitation of sensitive issues.

Communitarian Ethics

Communitarian ethics, as advanced by thinkers such as *Amitai Etzioni (1995)*, prioritises the collective good over individual gain. Applied to *IDAC,* this means advertisers must evaluate how their messages affect broader society.

Intertextual references should reinforce positive values, promote social harmony, and contribute meaningfully to the public sphere - rather than glorify selfishness or harmful behaviour.

Deontological Ethics

Deontological ethics, rooted in *Immanuel Kant's principle of duty (1996)*, emphasises doing what is *morally right regardless of the outcome*. In advertising terms, this means the ethical quality of a campaign should not depend solely on its reach or engagement. Even a highly successful advert is flawed if it misleads, disrespects, or manipulates its audience. The duty to communicate truthfully and fairly must come before commercial ambition.

Together, these ethical frameworks remind marketers that intertextuality is not just about cultural play - it is about moral responsibility in public discourse.

Integrating Ethics into the *IDAC Framework*

Within the *IDAC model*, the *C-STRIKE criteria* translate strategic business and ethical principles into actionable checks. Each component carries moral weight, ensuring that creativity remains accountable and culturally grounded.

Cultural Relevance (C) reflects both *uBuntu* and *communitarian ethics*. It requires advertisers to ensure that references align with local values, traditions, and sensitivities. Imported references or careless cultural borrowing can easily alienate audiences or trigger backlash. *Ethical intertextuality* should honour local culture and strengthen shared understanding.

Strategic Alignment (S) ensures that every *intertextual choice* aligns with the brand's mission and intended social value. From an ethical standpoint, it discourages opportunistic or misleading use of popular references. Instead, it promotes coherence between message, motive, and moral responsibility.

Tactical Execution (T) embeds ethics in the creative process itself. It focuses on how messages are expressed - ensuring that tone, imagery, and language respect the dignity of individuals and communities. Even well-intentioned *intertextuality* can offend if poorly executed. Ethical tactical execution therefore demands sensitivity, accuracy, and cultural respect at every stage of production.

Regulatory Compliance and Ethics (R) is the most explicit safeguard. It anchors campaigns in both *deontological duty* and *communitarian responsibility*, ensuring adherence to advertising laws and professional codes. This layer protects against *misleading claims, offensive references, and intellectual property violations* - reminding advertisers that integrity is non-negotiable.

Impact Measurability (I) connects ethics to accountability. Beyond reach or engagement, it measures whether campaigns achieve meaningful, responsible outcomes. Ethical evaluation asks: *Did the advert inform truthfully? Did it empower or exploit?* Measuring social and cultural impact, not just commercial performance, reinforces the principle that effectiveness must never come at the cost of ethics.

Key Differentiation (K), though often seen through a business lens, carries ethical implications. When applied conscientiously, it encourages brands to compete with integrity, avoiding manipulative or sensational tactics. *Differentiation* achieved ethically strengthens long-term trust rather than chasing fleeting attention.

Evaluation of Audience Response (E) completes the ethical loop. It goes beyond metrics to interpret public sentiment and understand whether messages were received respectfully. Ethical advertisers listen, learn, and adapt - acknowledging mistakes and refining future campaigns to avoid harm.

Practical Application of *Ethical Intertextuality*

Intertextual advertising needs constant ethical oversight, not just a one-time effort. Advertisers must approach every campaign with a mindset that prioritises respect for culture, audience understanding, and responsible communication.

A key step is *pre-campaign vetting*. Each *intertextual reference* should be carefully scrutinised before it reaches the public. Advertisers must ask themselves whether the reference is respectful, whether it aligns with Malawian values, and whether it could be *misinterpreted as offensive, misleading, or exploitative*. Even seemingly harmless cultural nods can trigger backlash if they touch on sensitive areas such as *religion, ethnicity, or gender norms*. This vetting process ensures that creativity is balanced with responsibility.

Equally important is *culturally grounded research*. Understanding local idioms, humour, symbols, and historical context is essential to prevent ethical missteps. Research should go beyond surface-level familiarity; it must capture how different segments of the Malawian audience interpret references. When grounded in authentic cultural knowledge, *intertextual creativity* resonates genuinely and avoids *tokenism* or *misrepresentation*.

Tokenism in this context refers to making a *superficial* or *symbolic effort* to include diverse cultural elements without genuine understanding or integration. This often produces representations that feel *inauthentic* or *exploitative*. *Misrepresentation* occurs when *cultural elements are depicted inaccurately, stereotypically, or in a way that distorts their true meaning*. Both *tokenism* and *misrepresentation* weaken the impact of *intertextual creativity*, as they prevent campaigns from connecting with audiences in a meaningful and respectful way.

Transparency and intent form the next layer of ethical practice. *Intertextual references* can be playful, humorous, or provocative, but the underlying purpose must be honest. Brands should seek to build connection, shared understanding, or meaningful engagement, rather than to manipulate emotions or exploit cultural symbols for attention. Clear intent helps maintain trust and reinforces brand credibility.

Finally, *continuous ethical review* is crucial throughout the campaign lifecycle. Monitoring audience responses after launch allows advertisers to detect misunderstandings or unintended negative reactions. When issues arise, swift clarification or adaptation demonstrates responsibility and reinforces ethical standards. This iterative review process ensures that *intertextual references* remain aligned with both *brand objectives* and the *social and cultural values of the audience*. Following these practices, advertisers can harness *intertextuality* not only as a creative tool but also as a medium for ethical, culturally aware, and socially responsible communication.

Ethical *Intertextuality* as Good Business

Ethical advertising is not only a moral imperative - it is also a strategic asset. Campaigns grounded in *uBuntu* and supported by *IDAC principles* build trust, loyalty, and positive brand identity. They show that *creativity* and *conscience* can coexist. In a market where public scrutiny is increasing, *ethical intertextuality* becomes a marker of professionalism and maturity. When used well, *intertextuality* can strengthen *social bonds* and *elevate brand credibility*. When used carelessly, it risks *confusion* and *cultural offence*. The *IDAC framework*, enriched by *uBuntu* and *broader ethical reasoning*, ensures that every reference contributes to both business success and collective dignity.

Chapter 6

Intertextuality as a Driver of Strategic Brand Success

Introduction

In previous chapters, we explored the types of intertextual references, their practical applications, and tools such as the *Intertextuality-Driven Advertising Cycle (IDAC)* that help strengthen and evaluate campaigns. We also established that marketing content creation is not trivial - it is not the work of interns, nor should it be reduced to a simple *WYSIWYG* exercise on platforms like *Canva*. Effective advertising demands strategy, cultural insight, and intellectual depth.

Digital marketing has become central to corporate communication. It is no longer just about visuals or catchy captions - it is the public face of strategy. Companies must view digital marketing as a strategic investment rather than a design function. Every post, image, or advert carries meaning and communicates brand values. Treated merely as a creative exercise, digital marketing risks losing its strategic intent, weakening the connection between message and market impact.

The digital arena is competitive, with brands contending not only with local players but also with global giants. Success depends on deliberate strategy rather than templates; visibility, differentiation, and engagement must be planned. Data is central to this process, offering measurable insights on reach, conversion, and sentiment - but without strategic interpretation, data becomes noise. Skilled marketers turn numbers into actionable knowledge, refining campaigns through evidence and insight.

Cultural intelligence is equally vital. Every marketplace is shaped by idioms, humour, and shared experiences, interpreted differently across audiences. Campaigns that overlook these nuances risk falling flat or being misread. Intertextuality bridges this gap, connecting global tools to local understanding to create messages that feel familiar, relevant, and resonant.

Today, reputation is built digitally. For many, a brand's online presence is the first point of contact. Poorly managed digital marketing - especially when detached from *ethics* or *strategy* - can erode trust faster than any traditional misstep. Strategic clarity, cultural awareness, and consistent integrity are not optional; they are essential for sustaining brands in a digital-first world.

Connecting with Digital Natives

Companies targeting younger audiences must move beyond basic digital visibility and embrace strategy-driven, purposeful engagement. These audiences are digital natives,

shaped by constant connectivity and exposure to global trends through platforms such as *YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter)*. They do not simply consume content; they actively participate in cultural creation.

For them, content is an extension of identity - something to *share, remix, and discuss*. To connect effectively, brands need to understand not just where these audiences are, but how they think, speak, and interact. This is where *intertextual advertising* becomes powerful.

In practice, it appears in forms such as *User Generated Content (UGC), Subtle User Generated Content (SUBC), Electronic Word of Mouth Spillover (eWoM), and Gamified Intertextuality*, allowing brands to engage audiences on their own terms while becoming part of ongoing *cultural conversations*.

Language and Tone

Digital natives value authenticity and clarity. They respond best to conversational, direct language rather than *corporate jargon* or *over-polished* messages. *Local slang, humour, and cultural references* can make content more *relatable*, provided they are used *genuinely* and *respectfully*. Forced attempts to *"sound young"* or *imitate youth culture* often backfire. The key is *cultural fluency - speaking the audience's language without losing brand credibility*.

Approach and Storytelling

Traditional advertising appeals to logic or aspiration; *digital-native audiences* connect through stories. They prefer narratives that are short, human, and emotionally engaging.

Campaigns that highlight real experiences (*narrative intertextuality*), community voices (*eWoM spillover*), or everyday creativity (*user generated content references*) perform better than formulaic sales pitches. *Intertextuality* strengthens this connection by weaving familiar references - music, memes, or cultural moments - into *storytelling* that feels both global and local.

Platform Selection

Each digital platform has its own rhythm, tone, and audience behaviour. *TikTok* thrives on *creativity* and *humour*, *Instagram* on *visuals* and *lifestyle*, *YouTube* on *depth and storytelling*, while *X (Twitter)* excels in *conversation and commentary*. Successful brands tailor content to each platform instead of reposting the same material across channels. This *platform-specific strategy* respects how digital natives use media - by mood, context, and community.

Rewards and Participation

Younger audiences appreciate recognition and involvement. Most digital campaigns are interactive - and should actually be designed to be *interactive campaigns* that invite participation - challenges, polls, user-generated content, or micro-rewards - foster loyalty. *Gamified engagement*, such as points, badges, or social recognition, gives audiences a reason

to stay connected. These small incentives create a sense of belonging and co-ownership of the brand narrative.

Spontaneity and Responsiveness

In *digital culture*, timing is everything. *Digital natives* expect real-time engagement - quick replies, witty comebacks, or timely posts reacting to current trends. Planned campaigns must leave room for spontaneity. Brands that respond fast and naturally are seen as *"alive,"* while those that take days to react appear detached.

Dialogue, Not Monologue

Finally, connecting with digital natives requires shifting from broadcasting to conversing. They expect dialogue, not direction. Brands that listen, reply, and adapt earn credibility. This means handling feedback - both praise and criticism - with humility and openness. A responsive brand feels human, while a silent one feels irrelevant.

In short, to connect with digital natives, brands must combine cultural intelligence with strategic agility. *Intertextuality* can play a crucial role here by linking modern platforms with familiar cultural elements - bridging the gap between global trends and local meaning. This approach transforms digital marketing from a performance of relevance into a genuine relationship.

Strategic *Intertextuality* in Digital Relationships

Many organisations and institutions possess digital platforms, yet lack cohesive digital strategies. Often, these digital platforms merely complement *traditional marketing* efforts. However, the *digital age* has fundamentally redefined how organizations cultivate and maintain relationships.

Public relations, stakeholder engagement, government relations, and shareholder communication have all shifted from periodic, one-way interactions to continuous, real-time dialogue. Digital platforms have become the new meeting ground for these exchanges, offering unprecedented reach, immediacy, and interactivity.

Yet to make these *digital relationships* meaningful and credible, brands must communicate in ways that feel authentic, relevant, and culturally aligned. This is where *intertextuality* becomes a strategic tool.

Intertextuality allows brands to speak the language of their audiences by drawing from shared symbols, stories, and cultural touchpoints. In digital public relations, for instance, referencing familiar national imagery, popular slogans, or cultural expressions can humanise a brand and strengthen emotional connection. A well-crafted post that cleverly ties a brand's message to a national event, proverb, or well-known campaign can achieve more engagement than formal statements.

In stakeholder relations, *intertextuality* can bridge corporate messages with community expectations. For example, when addressing issues of social responsibility, brands can reference shared cultural values such as *uMunthu (humanity)* or collective progress. These references reinforce sincerity and show that the organisation understands its social environment beyond corporate formalities.

Government relations also benefit from context-sensitive *intertextual communication. Policy engagement* on social media platforms can gain traction when framed using national development narratives or references to public service values. This approach demonstrates alignment with broader national goals rather than self-serving interests.

Shareholder and investor communication, though often data-driven, also thrives on trust and relatability. Digital reports, announcements, or CEO statements that balance factual rigour with cultural awareness help sustain confidence. Subtle references to resilience, unity, or shared national aspirations can make messages more grounded and persuasive.

Partnerships, whether with NGOs, influencers, or other businesses, can also be strengthened through *intertextual coherence.* When organisations align their tone, imagery, and cultural references, they present a *unified identity* that resonates more deeply with audiences. *Shared narratives* create *credibility* and make collaborations feel authentic rather than transactional. *Intertextuality* thus enhances *digital relationships* by embedding messages in familiar cultural and emotional contexts. It ensures that communication is not just transmitted but *felt.* In a digital landscape crowded with content, this emotional and cultural resonance is what sustains engagement, trust, and long-term strategic relationships.

Think Global, Act Local

Blending international narratives with local relevance is important in today's market. Virality on digital platforms alone does not drive business. Going viral among audiences who cannot access your product may earn applause but brings no *return on investment* unless a penetration strategy is on the horizon.

Intertextuality helps bridge this gap. When applied thoughtfully, it connects *familiar cultural cues* with globally recognisable formats, linking generations and cultures. This keeps local brands relatable, current, and authentic without losing their identity.

The temptation to copy wholesale is strong but risky. Imported ideas often ignore context, humour, or local sensitivities. What works elsewhere can confuse, offend, or fail locally.

Multinational brands with similar products across countries can benefit from controlled intertextual references. Examples include *DStv* across *Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa*; *Chibuku beer* across *Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe*; and *Airtel* across *Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, and Zambia*. In such cases, *eWOM Spillover intertextual references* often create strong *cross-market impact*.

Local competition, however, depends on market structure - a point discussed later in this chapter. *Intertextuality* requires *contextual intelligence*. Borrowing global references must go hand in hand with local adaptation. That calls for research into audience behaviour, cultural meaning, and media consumption habits. Without it, campaigns risk sounding borrowed rather than inspired. *Ethical intertextuality* is not imitation; it is interpretation.

From Creative Expression to Strategic Asset

Intertextuality should be viewed not merely as a *creative flourish* but as a *strategic tool* that drives brand success. When integrated into broader marketing frameworks, it strengthens market and brand positioning.

Market Leaders

As we have seen in many examples used earlier, the bigger the brands, the more diverse their deployment of *intertextuality*. From a business strategy point of view, *market leaders* use *intertextuality* to *reinforce dominance* and *maintain authority*. Their references sound powerful, often invoking *quality, superiority, history, success, or national pride to reaffirm trust.*

Challengers

Challengers deploy *intertextuality* disruptively, using it to question established conventions, parody industry leaders, or offer fresh interpretations that ignite conversation.

Referencing familiar cultural or *commercial touchpoints* helps these brands to create a sense of recognition while simultaneously challenging expectations. This approach not only captures attention but also positions the brand as bold, innovative, and willing to break from the status quo.

The disruption is often playful, witty, or provocative, encouraging audiences to engage, share, and debate the content. In doing so, *challengers* leverage *intertextuality* not just as a creative device, but as a *strategic tool* to *shift perceptions, build relevance, and carve out distinct space in crowded markets*.

Followers

Followers can use *intertextuality tactically* - identifying leaders' weaknesses or missed cultural cues and amplifying them cleverly to win attention.

Through well-crafted *intertextual campaigns*, brands at any level can sharpen their Strategic Positioning.

Market Structure and *Intertextuality* Adoption

Market structure significantly shapes how companies adopt and deploy *intertextuality* in their marketing. Below, we give an outline of how this plays out.

Perfect Competitive Markets

In *perfectly competitive markets*, where numerous small firms offer largely identical products and have minimal pricing power, *intertextuality* is typically employed with caution. The primary objective is to introduce subtle brand personality and *cultural resonance* without driving up creative costs, as consumers in such markets are highly price-sensitive and brand loyalty is limited. For instance, in the Malawian retail sector, many retailers source goods from wholesalers at set prices and rely on modest mark-ups to maintain profitability. *Cost control* is therefore important, leaving little room for elaborate *intertextual campaigns*.

Consequently, companies in these markets often favour *non-referential or straightforward advertising* that communicates price, availability, and basic brand identity rather than *culturally layered* or *referential content*. This approach ensures efficiency while maintaining relevance, recognising the structural constraints of the market.

Monopolistic Competition

In *monopolistic competition*, firms face *moderate pricing power* and *compete through product differentiation*, making *intertextuality a more central tool for creating brand identity*. Marketers can experiment with storytelling, popular culture references, and user-generated content to distinguish themselves from rivals and engage audiences more deeply.

Campaigns may remix memes, incorporate subtle cultural nods, or use playful formats to *foster recognition and relatability, balancing creativity with moderate risk*.

Oligopoly

Oligopolies, dominated by a few major firms, approach *intertextuality strategically*, often using it to *reinforce market positioning or respond to competitors*. In these concentrated markets, campaigns may parody rival brands, leverage globally recognisable formats adapted to local contexts, or create *gamified intertextual* experiences that spark engagement and conversation.

The stakes are higher: missteps are more visible and may provoke competitive responses, so firms carefully balance risk and reward. Here, *intertextuality* serves not only to *attract attention* but also to *assert authority, maintain relevance, and protect market share*.

Monopoly

In monopolistic markets, where a single firm dominates and faces high barriers to entry, intertextuality is less about disruption and more about sustaining relevance and cultural resonance. Campaigns often take an educational or aspirational approach, using familiar references to build trust and strengthen brand legitimacy. Because there is little

immediate competitive pressure, the focus shifts from differentiation to connection, ensuring the brand remains current, relatable, and culturally grounded without taking unnecessary creative risks.

Duopolistic Markets

Duopolies, with just two dominant competitors, use *intertextuality* as a tool to capture mindshare and differentiate directly from their rival. Campaigns may employ bold parody, satire, or culturally resonant references to provoke discussion and position the brand as innovative or daring. The risk is higher because any misalignment with audience expectations can backfire, but successful *intertextual campaigns* in this context can quickly shift perceptions and strengthen competitive advantage.

The telecommunications market in Malawi is essentially a duopoly, dominated by two primary firms, *Telekom Networks Malawi (TNM)* and *Airtel Malawi*, which together control nearly 100% of the mobile market. This concentration limits competition and gives both companies *substantial pricing power* and *strategic control over service offerings*, while also exhibiting the characteristics of an *oligopolistic market* in terms of *interdependent pricing* and *strategic decision-making*, thanks to the role of regulator, *Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA)*.

Across all market structures, the *adoption of intertextuality* is *shaped by the interplay between competitive pressure, audience expectations, and strategic goals*. In highly competitive markets, *intertextuality* is deployed to differentiate and engage, while in *concentrated or monopolistic markets*, it reinforces positioning, sustains relevance, and bridges cultural gaps. *Intertextuality* serves as a subtle yet powerful tool to signal authority and manage relationships, demonstrating that the structure of the market fundamentally informs how and why *intertextual strategies* are executed.

Chapter 7

Sustaining Competitive Advantage through *Intertextuality*

Epilogue

In this book, we have built a case for integrating *intertextuality* into digital advertising as a way of adapting to the evergrowing needs of the modern customer. Above all else, it has become apparent that *competitive advantage* is no longer defined solely by what a brand sells. It is measured by how meaning is communicated, how culture is understood, and how audiences are engaged.

Intertextuality sits at the heart of this evolution. Connecting new messages to existing cultural, emotional, and social references, *intertextuality* transforms advertising from a simple communication into a moment of recognition - telling audiences, *"We see you. We understand your world."* It turns fleeting attention into lasting connection.

Brands can deploy *intertextuality* in different ways. We have discussed a total of *21 different subtypes of references* from across three categories. With the power of *intertextuality* comes responsibility. Ethical practice is essential. *Misappropriating culture, ignoring intellectual property, or overlooking audience sensitivities risks damaging a brand's trust, credibility, and brand equity*.

The companies that succeed are those that use *intertextuality responsibly*, thoughtfully, and with respect. The intellectual foundations of *intertextuality* - from *Kristeva's* insights into the interconnectedness of texts to broader semiotic and cultural theories - offer a lens to understand its power.

In the *digital era*, audiences are not passive consumers; they are creators, remixers, and commentators. Brands that understand this, and that speak the language of lived experience, achieve something more than attention - they achieve relevance. They remain part of the conversation rather than spectators at the edge.

Intertextuality helps strengthen brand reputation and makes the brand more memorable. By referencing shared experiences or cultural touchpoints, it builds trust, emotional connection, and loyalty. It also supports *Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP)* by helping marketers identify the right audience, communicate with relevant cues, and position the brand as genuine and credible. When used carefully, *intertextuality* is not just a creative idea - it is a key part of a brand's strategy.

Virtual reality (VR) will expand *intertextuality* in *digital marketing* by allowing audiences to *enter* the *reference* rather than just recognise it. Instead of passively spotting borrowed cues, users can experience cultural, historical, or brand references in immersive form - walking through a recreated movie scene, interacting with an influencer avatar, or exploring a virtual setting drawn from a viral meme. This shifts *intertextuality* from symbolic borrowing to participatory meaning-making. For marketers, it means campaigns will no longer depend only on shared cultural memory but also on shared

experience. Brands that design *VR narratives* connecting familiar cultural references with authentic brand stories will dominate this next phase of digital engagement.

Looking into the future

Looking ahead, the future of digital marketing will be shaped by those who adopt intertextuality with intelligence, creativity, and ethical precision. Advanced technologies - AI, data-driven insights, and immersive digital platforms - will enable brands to deploy *intertextual strategies* with unprecedented accuracy and cultural relevance.

The most successful companies will combine technology with human insight, anticipating cultural shifts, co-creating meaning, and shaping the narratives that audiences inhabit.

In this future, *intertextuality* is more than a tool; it is a compass for sustained relevance, enduring engagement, and competitive advantage that is both culturally attuned and strategically informed.

Ultimately, *intertextuality* represents the evolution of marketing itself. It is a framework for connection, a lens for cultural intelligence, and a pathway to lasting relevance. Brands that embrace its potential will not simply compete - they will shape culture, define conversation, and secure a place in the hearts and minds of audiences for years to come. In the digital era, those who understand intertextuality are not just marketing - they are building meaning that endures.

Cardinal Sin to Avoid

There is one unforgivable mistake every advertising team must avoid: *copycat advertising*. Too often, brands jump onto a trend and recycle another advertiser's idea, merely dressing it up in their own branding to tick a *KPI* box. This practice is not only lazy but borders on plagiarism. It weakens originality and leads to *'reference fatigue'* - a state where audiences, having seen the same line or concept repeated across several brands, stop paying attention altogether. Instead, audiences begin to critique the method rather than engage with the message.

Figure 37: *An illustration of Reference Fatigue*

When more than five brands use the same reference at the same time, the *intertext* loses its edge and becomes background noise. The goal of *intertextuality* is to enrich creativity, not dilute it. This guide encourages advertisers to build their own *creative*

sandboxes - spaces where ideas are tested, shaped, and refined - rather than borrowed or copied, wholesale. The challenge going forward is to broaden the horizons of our advertising practice and use *intertextuality* as a mark of greatness, not imitation.

Sustaining Competitive Advantage through Intertextuality

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, *intertextuality* gives brands a smart way to stand out and stay relevant. Advertisers can create messages that feel recognisable and meaningful by drawing on familiar texts, cultural stories, and shared experiences. Done well, this approach turns advertising into cultural storytelling - strengthening identity, loyalty, and trust beyond simple product promotion.

Key Strategies for Sustaining Competitive Advantage

Memorability and Recall: *Intertextual references* connect with what audiences already know, making adverts more memorable. When people recognise a line from a song, a popular meme, or even a competitor's tagline, the brand message instantly feels familiar and engaging. This familiarity helps keep the brand top-of-mind amid competing messages.

Emotional Connection: Shared *cultural memories* evoke *emotion* - humour, nostalgia, empathy - which helps audiences relate more deeply to a brand. These *emotional bonds* often last longer than *rational appeals*, turning customers into loyal advocates less likely to switch to competitors.

Strategic Differentiation: In a space crowded with similar messages, *intertextuality* offers a distinctive voice. Whether through playful parody, cultural association, or subtle rivalry, brands can show creativity and personality that are hard to imitate.

Cultural Authenticity: For Malawian audiences, cultural grounding is critical. Referencing local sayings, idioms, or events shows awareness of the audience's reality. It shows respect for culture and enhances authenticity, helping brands avoid appearing detached or imported.

Digital Adaptability: The interactive nature of digital platforms makes *intertextuality* even more powerful. It encourages sharing, remixing, and discussion - forms of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that extend campaign reach and influence. When audiences co-create or respond to branded messages, they reinforce the brand's relevance and visibility.

Ethical Practice: *Intertextuality* works best when applied responsibly. Brands must avoid harm, respect people and communities, and ensure legal compliance. Ethical referencing builds trust - an asset far more enduring than short-term attention.

Intertextuality is not a decorative technique but a strategic advantage. Brands that weave cultural awareness, emotional truth, and ethical discipline into their campaigns will not

only attract engagement but also sustain credibility and competitiveness in the digital age.

Return on Investment: Does Virality Equal Money in the Bag?

Too often, digital marketers become obsessed with reach - measured by how viral a post goes. Yet virality alone does not translate into financial returns. The real goal of digital marketing is not just visibility, but revenue: turning engagement into action that brings money into the bag.

A post may attract millions of views, but if it fails to move audiences towards purchase, loyalty, or advocacy, it remains mere spectacle. *Intertextuality*, when used strategically, bridges this gap by turning attention into value. The return comes not from how many people see the advert, but from how deeply they connect with it and how that connection translates into measurable action.

A well-executed *intertextual advert* creates layered engagement - *recognition, emotional response, and behavioural intent*. Each stage strengthens *recall* and increases the likelihood of *conversion*. For example, when audiences share an advert because it cleverly references a social story or rival brand, they extend its reach at no extra cost to the advertiser. This *earned media effect - audience-driven amplification* - improves *ROI by lowering the cost per impression while sustaining interest longer than paid reach*.

However, attention must be paired with *clear conversion pathways*. A viral advert should lead audiences to act - *click, visit, subscribe, or buy*. Without such links, the buzz fades without business impact. ROI from *intertextuality* depends on how well the creative insight is tied to the brand's commercial goals.

In Malawi's growing digital space, where *eWOM* spreads fast and engagement is public, virality can also backfire. A poorly judged *intertextual reference* may draw *ridicule* or *backlash*, forcing brands into damage control. The financial cost of repairing reputation often exceeds the gain from initial visibility.

The goal, therefore, should not be virality for its own sake but strategic resonance - earning visibility that builds trust, shapes perception, and drives action. When *intertextuality* connects creativity with clarity of purpose, virality becomes more than noise; it becomes value.

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About the Book

The Power of Intertextuality: A Strategic Approach to Digital Advertising in Malawi

In the fast-moving world of digital marketing, a single reference - be it a meme, slogan, or cultural cue - can make or break a campaign. This concise guide equips practitioners with practical insights to use intertextuality effectively, ethically, and strategically.

This book is a simplified version of *References in Malawian Digital Advertisements: Mechanics of Intertextuality*, designed for busy marketers who want actionable guidance without wading through extensive theory.

Drawing on Malawian digital advertising and lessons from experienced marketers, it documents best practices while creating a framework for replication and extension beyond mere mimicry. It shows how brands can connect with audiences through familiar references while respecting culture, ethics, and audience perception.

About the Author:

Mallick Mnela, MCIM (UK), is a digital marketing researcher and practitioner with a focus on advertising communication, technology, and marketing regulation. At the time of writing this book, he was a postgraduate candidate pursuing an *MSc in Digital Marketing* at the *Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)*. His work combines research with practical insights, focusing on applying marketing ideas in ways that fit the Malawian context.

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